やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

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eight

GAGAGA

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雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita

Chapter 1

It doesn’t need to be said that even **Hikigaya Komachi** can get angry.

“What if?”

This is a “what if?” scenario.

What if life was like a game where you could load up a save file and go back to a point where you could alter your choice? Would your life change in any way?

The answer is a resounding no.

Only those who were blessed with choices would benefit. To those who never had those choices in the first place, that hypothetical scenario was meaningless.

As such, there would be no regrets. More accurately, it was life itself that was the epitome of regrets.

That’s how it was.

There was also the “little too late” scenario. Once you got started on “what if” scenarios, you wouldn’t see the end of it. Nothing would change regardless of the answer you gave. The moment you had settled on a decision, it was already too late to take it back.

Ifs, parallels, and loops were constructs that didn’t exist in this world. In short, the scenarios in life were all linear. Preaching for possibilities was nothing but a futile effort.

I was fully aware of how wrong I was. The world, however, was a bigger perpetrator than I was.

It was ridden with wars, poverty, discrimination and a bunch of other things. Job hunting could easily go unrewarded with absolutely no offers. Even part time jobs took your pocket change as collateral damage, particularly in the cases where you had to cover the missing amount from your own pocket when you had to do a money count.

So where exactly did this world’s truth exist? A truth defined by the wrongdoings of this world couldn’t be called a truth at all.

On the other hand, the truth may very well be in the form of all that was wrong in that world instead.

But, was there any meaning in trying to prolong something that was bound to end?

Eventually, you’ll lose everything. This was an absolute truth.

But still, even so.

The eventual loss of everything had beauty to it.

The eventual end of everything had meaning to it. Even things like temporary repose, a combination of stagnation and uncertainty in life, would eventually be something you couldn't deal with anymore.

Coming to terms with these truths was what you should be doing.

One day, sure enough, you'll look back on the things you had lost as if they were treasures you had come to adore and as if they were similar to the happiness of drinking sake by yourself.

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What an unpleasant morning.

The clear weather skies were accompanied with a chilly wind that softly shook the windows. In the room was a relaxing space that invited napping temptations.

Really, what an unpleasant morning.

It was the Monday after getting back from the field trip that finished up the break.

Mondays gave preemptive rise to feelings of melancholy. After I forced my sluggish body out of bed, I squirmed my way towards the washroom.

I looked at the mirror with half-awake eyes. Reflected every time was me.

…Hmph, the same as always.

Indeed, I was as unchanging as ever to the point that it was sort of anti-climactic.

Everything reflected in the mirror compromised the basic fundamentals of what made me: the feeling of not wanting to go to school, the feeling of wanting to just sit around all day and do nothing, and the feeling of oncoming homesickness moments after I leave the house.

But there was something different. The water I splashed on my face was colder than usual.

With the autumn season over, it was safe to say it was now winter. November was coming to a close and what remained of the year was just one more month.

My parents had left early for work to avoid the commuting rush. The upcoming seasons were prime time for when people would barely make it on time to work or when people took late hours since it was unnecessarily crowded. As expected, people were still weak to the winter mornings even after becoming an adult. After all, anyone would want to stay cooped up in their futon until the very last second.

Even so, they all had a reason why they needed to continue working.

There was little doubt there were people who acted based on proactive reasons. But, on the flip side, there were people who only acted that way because society had demanded that of them. To avoid being the odd one out, they went with the flow but at the same time, making sure it was a natural transition.

In short, people acted only when there was something to gain and nothing to lose.

My face that was reflected by the mirror was clearly as normal as any other person. But my eyes that stared directly back at me wasn't by all means ordinary; the rottenness in the eyes were nothing short of being at the pinnacle of all high schools throughout.

But that was what made it me. That was what made it Hikigaya Hachiman.

Satisfied with my unchanging self, I left the washroom.

When I entered the living room, my sister Komachi was standing in the kitchen. She took a daunting pose as she stood in front of the teapot.

Since my parents had finished their breakfast early, the menu was already set to be Japanese. Once Komachi brought out the tea, everything was ready.

The water began boiling as soon as I pulled out the chair. Komachi poured the water into the teapot and quickly raised her head.

"Ah, morning onii-chan."

"Yep. Morning."

We exchanged our morning greetings. After, Komachi spoke with an impressed tone.

"…You seem kinda wide awake today."

I titled my head when she said that. Was I normally that bad of a morning person? Wait, no, on second thought, of course I'd be weak in the morning. My blood pressure wasn't low by all means but you probably couldn't say the same for my motivation. That said, Komachi wasn't always entirely wrong when she pointed something out to me. But true enough, I really was fully awake today.

"…Aah, well, the water was pretty cold when I washed my face earlier."

I blurted out the first thing that came to mind as my reason and Komachi looked at me dubiously.

"Uh huh… I'm pretty sure there's nothing different with the water though."

"It got pretty cold all of a sudden, didn't it? Anyway, hurry up and let's eat so we can go to school."

"Ah, okay."

She carried the tea kettle over to the dining table while making a lot of stepping noises with her slippers on. It seems that my family did not pick Ayataka as the brand of tea to be in the tea kettle.

After we sat in our seats, we clapped our hands and gave thanks for our food in sync.

During the winter season, the Hikigaya household Japanese meals consisted of primarily warm meals and miso soup. The miso soup's purpose was to warm up your body before you head out. Overflowing love from mom, I suppose.

I blew at my miso soup to cool it down since I was the owner of the sensitivity of a cat's tongue. When I looked at Komachi who was doing the same thing, our eyes met.

Komachi placed her bowl on the table gently and slowly spoke up.

"…Hey."

"Hm?"

I responded and gave her a glance that suggested her to continue. When I did, Komachi asked me as if she was probing something.

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing at all… Instead, think about this. Absolutely nothing happened in this life of mine. They say that an evil may sometimes turn out to be a blessing in disguise. So, on that assumption, it might be better for something to happen after all. Like, if you contracted some chronic disease, you'll end up going to the hospital often but on the contrary, you'll end up being healthy. In that sense, if nothing happened then that means there might possibly be a storm brewing up soon."

I spat those words in one breath only to have Komachi blink at me in surprise.

"What's wrong, onii-chan?"

Completely normal. A completely normal reaction.

She asked without the slightest hint of being affected. I mean, everything I said was completely stupid, but aren't you going to say something about it?

I really had to rack my brain to come up with all that too…

As expected, Monday completely threw me off.

"Well, you know… Basically, nothing happened."

I carried the sunny side eggs up to my mouth with a quick motion. But still, were sunny-side eggs more of a Western dish or a Japanese dish?

After hearing my reply, Komachi answered indifferently.

Komachi pushed her tray aside to learn forward and peered into my face.

"Heey, did you know?"

"What? Mameshiba[1]?"

Or maybe she was a sheltered cat which meant she was a sheltered princess. Wait, maybe she was the rice monster Pappu, we're in the middle of breakfast after

all. There was no way she was acting like Flabby Panda2 either. Komachi wasn't flabby in the slightest. In the first place, leaning forward meant emphasizing her chest so it might be better for her to get a little flabbier there. Actually no, there's no need for that. She was already super cute the way she was now.

As I convinced myself, Komachi let out a short sigh.

"Onii-chan, normally you say the most pointless things, but when something's wrong, you actually say things that are even more pointless than the usual…"

"Aah, right…"

Harsh critic as always. Being told what you said was pointless makes it hard to respond. Well, it was true that I was only saying pointless things anyway. But still, analyzing me in fine detail from my speech and conduct, was she some sort of psychological investigator or something? What's with that profiling?

"You know…"

Komachi poked at her salad with her chopsticks and looked like she was going to say something only to be stopped by her hesitation. She rolled around a nearby tomato on her dish.

I had an idea of what words were lodged in her throat likely thanks to our bond as siblings. Or maybe because I ended up realizing the same thing she did.

Komachi gently put down her chopsticks and asked about me.

"Did… something happen with Yui-san and Yukino-san?"

I continued to eat in silence while listening to her. I was taught to not talk while eating after all. I took my time swallowing my food. After that, along with various feelings, I gulped down my miso soup.

"…Did they say something?"

"Nope."

When I asked her, Komachi shook her head slightly.

"They're not the type to talk about those things and I'm sure you know this too, right?"

When she brought that up, I had nothing to say.

Whether it was Yukinoshita or Yuigahama, while they were both pretty critical about the most worthless things, they definitely wouldn't blabber about things to another person's sister.

"I just thought something was going on."

Komachi spoke and eyed my reaction.

Living together for a long time meant that there would be things that the both of us would notice about each other, be it good things or bad things.

But there were things you didn't want noticed either.

“I see.”

After I answered her with empty words, my eyes hovered towards the clock on the wall. I picked up my chopsticks and continued eating.

In contrast, Komachi was taking it slow.

“You should chew your food carefully. Anyway,”

Komachi looked intent on continuing the conversation. It seems she predicted I was going to cut the conversation short.

Her stare looked into the day after tomorrow and she looked like she suddenly remembered something.

“Remember something like that happened before?”

“Really now?”

As I said that, I became completely aware of what she was talking about. What she was alluding to was the incident in June. Speaking of which, I get the feeling Komachi did the same thing back then; pointing something out to me.

Oh. I haven’t changed at all. That’s me for you.

Not even the slightest growth or change, nothing at all.

Nevertheless, Komachi gripped her teacup seemingly to warm up her hands. She was doing that even though there wasn’t a tea stalk floating atop; that, I could see clearly.

“…But, I think it might be a bit different than last time.”

“Well, of course. People change day to day after all. Even cells get replaced all the time. Given five or seven years, people will change, probably. So basically, you know, humans are…”

“Okay, okay.”

Komachi smiled in resignation and tried to play it off. After she let go of her teacup, she put her hands on her lap.

“…So, what did you do?”

“Why are you asking as if I was the one who did something?”

I responded back, but Komachi continued to look at me in silence. That expression told me that she wouldn’t settle for anything stupid coming from me.

I scratched at my head quickly and averted my eyes.

“…Nothing happened. There was nothing at all in the first place.”

Komachi sighed.

“Even if onii-chan isn’t aware of it, there’s always the possibility that you did something. Okay fine… try talking about something one by one.”

“So you say…”

I thought for a little bit.

Although it's been a few days since I got back from Kyoto, I did do my fair share of thinking. I asked myself whether there was something wrong with my actions or whether there was a problem with something I did. I most certainly did reflect on my actions.

But regardless, the only thing that came to mind was a solution that was the most effective that paved way for a conclusion that was guaranteed to be safe. Given the limited options we had available, I thought the end result was more than enough.

The worst possible situation was avoided and we even managed to clear another request at the same time. As for whether the actual process was something to be praised or not, that was up for debate but ultimately, we had reached a conclusion.

But, there wasn't a need to explain in detail of all those things to Komachi. As long as I was aware of it, that was enough.

"No, nevermind, it's nothing."

I shrugged it off. From there, I signaled that that was the end of this conversation and proceeded to wolf down my food.

Despite that, Komachi continued to face me.

"Oh you. So, what happened?"

Komachi tilted her head dubiously, rested her chin on her hands, and jokingly laughed.

As cute as the posture she was in, there was a strong sense of purpose behind it. It was a stance that wouldn't allow the conversation to end on a vague note.

But, at that point, it was starting to get a little grating.

Normally, I wouldn't get irritated at this level of nosiness from Komachi. Typically, I'd laugh it off and go with the flow and just say something random only to confuse her.

But if we're talking about normally, then Komachi wouldn't be this obstinate about her business.

When I tried to act like I always did with Komachi, consciously trying to enact how I should be, I grew aggravated.

"…You're being annoying. Enough already."

"…"

My words unintentionally sounded rough to Komachi's surprise. However, she was only shocked for a split second and her shoulders started to shake.

She suddenly opened her eyes wide and yelled out in a loud voice.

"…W-What's with that tone of yours!?"

"I don't sound any different than usual. Truth of the matter, you really were being annoying."

These words definitely weren't the ones that I wanted to say. I definitely wanted to just play it off. But once the words came out, I couldn't take them back.

No matter when and where, you couldn't take anything back.

Komachi narrowed her eyes and glared at me. Eventually, she dropped her eyes to the table.

"…Hmph, okay. Fine, I won't ask about it anymore."

"Please do."

After that, there were no more further conversations at the dining table.

We both continued to eat in silence and the time that passed slowly felt like it was frozen.

During that time, Komachi quickly gulped down her miso soup and stood up. She stacked her dishes and plates in a hurry and carried them to the sink.

She then walked briskly to the door and stopped. Without looking at me, she spoke quickly.

"I'll be going first. Make sure to lock the door."

"Okay."

I gave her a short answer and Komachi slammed the door closed.

In that moment, I could hear a small voice.

"…Something did happen."

Left alone in the living room, I grabbed my tea. The tea already lost its warmth and when I sipped it, it was lukewarm.

It's been a few years since I've seen Komachi act like that. It was too late but I wonder if I got her mad…… I got worried.

Komachi doesn't get angry very often. But when she does, she was the type to stay angry for a while. In addition to that, she was a girl right in the middle of puberty. When she comes home, I don't know what kind of face she'll make.

Even though she's my actual sister, I don't know.

It truly was difficult to get along with other people.

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The scenery on the way to school was completely dyed in autumn colors.

The leaves of the trees that lined up along the bicycle path on Hanamigawa Street either decorated the long running lines of trees or fell down to the floor. The

sky stretched far and wide overhead while the dry sea breeze blew down the path, overpowering the summer warmth.

As small as it was, it definitely did feel like the season was about to change. In particular, the change from summer to fall was easy to see with your own eyes. And once it was late fall, you would then see the colors of winter start to settle in.

This consecutive change in seasons may have been the only time you could see the diverse transformations with your own eyes.

What could the neighbors be doing this late in autumn?

The saying of a famous haiku.

Unique to this season was the melancholy, wretchedness, and possibly even a fragment of their loneliness that caused people to wonder what their neighbors could be doing.

Loneliness was what piqued a person's curiosity in the well-being of others. To push out your own loneliness, you worry about others.

But if you looked at that in another way, it might have just been the manifestation of the desire to worry about yourself.

The person reflected on the other side of the mirror was just a stranger or so they say. However, that stranger was ultimately the person themselves; through this visible pretense they call a filter, what was left was just the person themselves.

Therefore, people only really thought about themselves.

When people were curious about the well-being of others, they were comparing themselves; an act simply to decide their own position by verifying it with others.

The use of others to establish their own position lacked any form of honesty. Doing it this way was wrong.

As such, isolation was justice as well as the correct answer.

My bike rattled as I proceeded on ahead. Occasionally, there were sounds of rust squeaking coming from the bike somewhere. Regardless, I pedaled on without worrying about it.

Considering the time, you wouldn't be late but you'd definitely make it to the classroom at the last minute.

This was my usual commute time.

When I entered the bike parking venue, there were people running ahead in a hurry.

I locked my bike and hurried along to the front entrance like everyone else. Whenever I was alone, I would walk with a quick pace. This was a skill that was engraved in me since I barely ever walked with anyone. At this pace, I just might

end up being considered for the Tokyo Olympics walking race as Japan's representative. Yeah right.

The front entrance was always quite the sight since it exuded a comfortable atmosphere.

The morning greetings and talk added to the commotion filling up the stairs which flooded into the hallway.

With the biggest event, the field trip, finally over, everyone had returned to their ordinary high school lives.

The classroom was no different.

I shuffled noiselessly through the aisles between the desks in the conversation filled classroom. When I made it to my seat, I quietly pulled out my chair.

I sat down silently and waited for morning homeroom to start.

Even if I tried to space out, my ears and eyes would continue to process information of their own accord.

Since my classmates didn't react to me at all, it seems that the fake confession from the other day didn't go public. Well, that seems about right. Just thinking about it logically, there wasn't a person who'd want to spread rumors about it.

I'm sure Tobe, Ebina, and even Hayama wouldn't feel particularly pleasant about it if it became talk of the school.

The atmosphere of the class was the same as always. As a matter of fact, the atmosphere seemed to be better than usual.

Clearly, having gone through the trials of a field trip together, their bonds had deepened even further. But no, that wasn't the case.

Instead, it was probably due to the remaining time they had left.

Going to a chilly place like Kyoto was one of the biggest events in the lives of high school students and they were able to see first-hand the change in seasons. Now that that was over, it's likely that everyone more or less became aware of their situation.

November was going to end shortly. Once we were halfway into December, we'll have winter break which ends the year and continues into January. It'll then be February which had fewer days than the typical month and the remainder of March will finish up with spring break. The remaining time left continues to tick by, hour by hour. In short, the remaining time we had left in this classroom was close to three months.

That's why they wanted to treasure this moment.

But who did they treasure this moment for? Their friends weren't the ones to say the least.

No, what they treasured was their youth. This very moment that they're absorbed in was what they treasured. You could make a case for calling this narcissism as a matter of fact.

As I arbitrarily observed, analyzed, and came to my conclusion, I let out a small yawn.

Thinking up of all these absurd things was proof I was tired.

It was the first day after the holidays and I could feel my body weighing down on me already.

To get the soreness out of my shoulders, I stretched my neck around.

The usual faces of my classmates came into view and they were chatting up storms as always. At another spot was someone with a ponytail looking outside through the window.

Kawasaki was in the classroom and stood there looking agitated. However, she looked steady and unchanging as ever.

When I looked ahead of her, there was a group of two to three girls showing each other photos of the trip. In that group of girls was Sagami having a good time. She was one, rare even, of a kind to not see any kind of growth despite going through all of those events from before. Well, I don't really want to get mixed up with her anymore so I don't really care. I couldn't hear any form of insults coming from them which might have been thanks to the field trip.

Sagami's group wasn't the only one talking about the field trip as there were other groups spread out in the classroom doing just the same.

However, eventually these chats of the field trip will turn into memories and sink into the depths of their memories. When they look at their photos again, memories will come rushing back only to change into something different.

This didn't apply just to the field trip since I'm sure this very moment was just the same.

Of course, those who were aware of that were few and far between. It was also possible they noticed already and were just putting up bravado to have fun.

Little by little, everyone will act as if they haven't noticed anything and pretend as if they were never aware of anything in the first place.

That's why all of them might have been the same.

I continued looking around the classroom, particularly in the back.

It was the same, unchanging scenery.

"Ya know, we made it back to Chiba, right? At the Keiyou Line, they were already gettin' into the Christmas mood, so I was panicking there. Like, the Disney Land advertisements are frikkin' crazy!"

The one that played with the hair on the back of his with a playful attitude was Tobe. He was just as energetic as he was before the field trip.

“Disney Land’s getting way into it!”

“I get it.”

Ooka and Yamato acted just the same and followed along with Tobe.

“Disney Land huh~”

The one who said that while playing with her blonde curls using the tips of her fingers looking spaced out was Miura. If Miura were one of those girls who looked up to the Disney princes, I think that’d make her quite girly.

“It’s already that time of the season huh……”

The one with a smile on his face while resting his chin on his hands was Hayama. Listening to them was Yuigahama who placed her index finger on her chin and as her eyes hovered up towards the ceiling, she spoke as if she remembered something.

“Ah, speaking of which, I think they built a new attraction there.”

After she spoke, Ebina crossed her arms and began thinking.

“Eh? Isn’t that for the resort side? Sometimes it’s hard to tell which one it is…… that is, which one is on top and bottom.”

“Ebina, stop.”

Ebina was tapped on the head by Miura but smiled afterwards.

Hayama’s group was the same as always.

I felt slightly relieved seeing that.

It was the world that they wished for; a stagnating world that never changed.

This world of theirs was eventually going to decay and rot, but that’s not to say it wasn’t already. So maybe that was its true form after all.

Both Hayama and Ebina didn’t interfere with this side.

That was indeed the correct decision. If they wanted to continue as they were before and after the field trip, then their interaction with each other shouldn’t change. But that also meant that the distance between me and them was everlasting.

As I looked at them stupidly, my eyes suddenly met with Yuigahama’s.

“…”

“…”

It wasn’t that long at all and only a few seconds should’ve passed. But oddly enough, it felt longer than it should have. As if our gazes were trying to probe the other, I quickly averted my eyes in discomfort.

I rested my body on my left hand and closed my eyes. Although I averted my eyes, my ears still continued to work.

"It's that, yeah? Like we'll all go to Disney Land, like to here!"

"That huh?"

"Yeah."

Their conversation had nothing substantial in it, but regardless, Hayama's group continued to talk.

There, Yuigahama's laughter mixed in with the others to which she seemed to be relieved as she stroked her chest.

…But really, there's absolutely nothing substantial in their conversations.

It'd be bad if the conversation was just because of the mood.

On the same note, they could easily just be talking to each other while directly avoiding the real issue. Yet another possibility was they were enacting a charade to simulate their usual group dynamic from before the field trip.

In any case, it's a beautiful thing to have friends. The affection for each other and being each other's shield was a beautiful thing. They were keeping up their appearances up quite nicely. Of course it'd be beautiful.

As such, the formula was comprised of these extremely simple elements: to be on good terms equals beauty equals affectation and being each other's shield. As expected, my math sense was in bad shape. Speaking of which, completed mathematical formulas were beautiful according to one branch of the sciences. I can see where they were coming from. There was a sense of security in the truth that was defined to be everlasting. But, anyway, getting all fired up over a mathematical formula will make me look like a scientific pervert. As expected, science and mathematics were disgusting.

As I thought of useless things to kill time, I opened my eyes slightly to check the time. The bell was going to ring soon…

At that moment, the figure of someone who rushed to make it on time to class appeared outside the class. He was in a hurry although his pace seemed relaxed.

The person who opened the door shakily and poked his head through the opening to look into the classroom was Totsuka. Once he confirmed the situation in the classroom, he sighed. Totsuka wiped down his sweat and looked at his watch.

"Yay, I made it on time…"

Totsuka nodded with a relieved expression and exchanged greetings with classmates on the way to his seat.

A little halfway towards his seat, Totsuka noticed that I was looking at him, the entire time might I add, and approached me. Actually, what should be

questioned here was why I was looking at him the entire time, but I'll flip the question there: was there anyone who wasn't always looking at someone?

Since Totsuka had ran here to class, he was breathing hard with a flushed face. He must have been at morning practice since the exhaustion reflected in his eyes was getting to me.

"Morning, Hachiman."

"…Yeah, morning."

I cleared my throat to avoid getting worked up about the situation and greeted him. But as calm as I was, it wasn't like me at all. I responded with an appropriate tone.

But, Totsuka looked at me in puzzlement and was oddly quiet. The hands he had gently lifted up were stuck airborne.

"…"

"What's up?"

When I asked, Totsuka waved his hands playing it off and smiled.

"Ah, nothing, just thought you were saying hi just like normal."

"…"

Upon hearing that, I shifted just slightly earlier to my reaction. Was there something different than usual?

But thinking about it probably wouldn't give me an answer.

I shut off my brain there and spoke.

"Aah… Yeah, right. Just like normal. Were you at morning practice?"

"Yep. It's been so long that I got absorbed in it. Ah, still feeling tired from the field trip?"

I recalled the trip on my back home. I was asleep for most of the entire trip on the Shinkansen. He must be talking about that. For the most part, I was half-awake, but I really wasn't in the mood to talk with anyone at the time… Umm, I mean I wasn't exactly in the greatest mood and I didn't want to let Totsuka see that side of me, you know?

I mean, I want to stay as the cool Hikigaya Hachiman in front of Totsuka after all. What is this guy saying?

"Aah, yeah, I'm good."

"I see, that's good then."

Totsuka replied with a smile and at that moment, the bell rang. Totsuka waved and left for his seat. I smiled comfortably in response.

Right, I wasn't tired at all anymore. Or should I say, the fatigue that I've been suffering from was blown away just now.

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As classes ended one by one, I could feel my body getting increasingly sluggish. I began to count the remaining hours left of school out of habit.

And then, the day concluded with homeroom again which also meant the end of the countdown.

Time was up.

I grabbed my bag that had nothing important inside and stood up.

People headed for their clubs and headed for home quickly shuffled out of the classroom. I could feel stares pricking at my back but that was eventually cut off when I closed the sliding door behind me.

The hallway was submerged in a relaxing atmosphere. Students were running back and forth heading in different directions. They showed no signs of stopping despite walking so leisurely.

I chose to walk down the side of the hallway that wasn't lit up by the sun which didn't feel as warm as the other side.

I descended down the stairs and noticed that the density of students wasn't as high as usual. The reason was probably due to some classes still stuck in homeroom.

Not a single person called out to me or questioned my actions as I continued on to the front entrance. I arrived without a hitch.

Starting from here, I'd change my shoes and head for the bike parking area. After unlocking my bike, I'd ride home while spacing out. In a short while, I'd eventually make it home safe and sound.

But that wasn't very like me.

I am me. Just like always. That's why I should pass the time like I always do.

Just as I exited the front entrance, a vending machine came into view.

It was time to change gears. I chose canned coffee. But again, what I chose wasn't the Ayataka brand.

"…This sure is bitter."

I gulped down the coffee and threw the empty can into the trash. The bitter taste continued to linger in my mouth and running around wouldn't make it go away.

As usual, my legs felt heavy but I forced myself to move. I took a route different than the one I usually used to go to the club room.

As I walked through the hallway and ascended the stairs, bothersome thoughts started to fill my head. I made small sighs while I did.

After taking my time, I was in finally in front of the club room.

Before I placed my hand on the door, I breathed in deeply.

At that moment, I could hear voices leaking out from the inside. I couldn't make heads or tails of what they were talking about, but it seems like they were here already.

Having confirmed that, I opened the door in one motion.

Once I did, they stopped talking.

"…"

The three of us were silent. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, who were fixated on me, had a look of surprise.

They probably thought I wouldn't bother coming since it was so late already. They were half correct. I wasn't particularly that motivated to come here after all.

I was just being stubborn, that's all. It was just the stubbornness of someone who was shredded to pieces by the malicious and uncooperative intent of others.

This show of resistance belonged only to me for the sake of not denying my past, my actions, and my beliefs.

I greeted them with a nod and proceeded to my designated spot.

Once I situated myself in the chair I pulled out, I took out an unfinished book from my bag. The bookmark that marked my spot in the book was still the same as it was before the field trip.

When I began reading, time that was frozen began to move again.

Laid out on the table were quilt tea cozies with baked sweets and chocolates. Lined up one by one were a tea cup and mug with steam arising from both.

The room felt warm and smelled of tea possibly from water that was recently just boiled.

However, I could feel the warmth of the room gradually drop and drop.

Yukinoshita looked at me with cold piercing eyes.

"…So you came after all."

"Yep, as you can see."

I answered nonchalantly and flipped the page I was on despite having only read a little less than half of it.

Yukinoshita didn't say a word after that.

Yuigahama snuck hesitant glances at me, but the only thing she did was place her mug to her mouth.

But true enough, the mood was incredibly stuffy. It was pretty much asking me why I came.

The criticizing silence continued.

My eyes followed along the lines of the book. I rested my back against the chair and loosened my shoulders as I flipped the pages. It was the start of the unproductive period where I unconsciously began to count down the remaining time between the remaining pages of the book and when it was time to head home.

Someone had cleared their throat, the rustling of clothes could be heard, and someone could be heard fidgeting.

Even the ticking of the long hand of the clock could be heard.

As if that was the trigger, Yuigahama slightly breathed in and spoke up.

"Ah, speaking of which, everyone was acting really normal. Um, that is… everyone…"

Although she was in the middle of her speech, her words grew increasingly mumbled as if the stale atmosphere was crushing her. But, Yukinoshita and I were looking directly at her.

By everyone, she probably meant Tobe, Ebina, Hayama and even Miura.

But she was right. The field trip was over but that group hadn't change at all. They were on good terms like always and that was something you could take from just looking at them.

"…Right, just looking at them gives me the impression there's nothing wrong."

It wasn't like I was proud of what I did. In fact, what I did was probably classified as the worst things you could do. Regardless, the fact that what I did didn't go wasted saved me.

That's why it was fine to consider that as my own honest opinion.

"…I see. Then, that's fine."

Yukinoshita followed the rim of her tea cup with her fingertips as she said that. But, her weary gaze was directed at the surface of the tea and her expression indicated she wasn't in the least convinced.

As if Yuigahama mustered her strength after that conversation was over, she laughed heartily while caressing the ball of hair on her head.

"I mean, it was a little scary, but I didn't really have anything to worry about. Everyone's just… normal."

That summoned energy lost momentum halfway through. She lowered her despondent face downwards and the words she uttered at the very end sounded hollow.

"…I don't really know what they're thinking about anymore."

Exactly who were those words directed at? The chance that the word everyone included people not limited to Hayama and his groupies startled me.

As I sat there with no response, Yukinoshita spoke up.

"…That's how it was originally. There's no way we'd understand what they'd be thinking about anyway."

Yuigahama became quiet again after hearing those blunt words. The warmth of the mug that Yuigahama gripped onto had already disappeared.

Seeing Yuigahama look hurt, Yukinoshita continued on with her words with "besides".

"Even if people knew what each other were thinking, whether we'll understand or not is a different problem."

Yukinoshita stretched out her hand to the tea cup she was looking down on. Although the tea should've been cold by now, she drank it slowly and carefully and silently placed the cup back on the saucer without making any noise. It was as if she hated the sound.

The silence questioned me. Regarding the meaning of her words, that is.

"…Sounds about right."

There wasn't a need to think about it since the meaning was obvious. What Yukinoshita said was absolutely correct and there was no fault that I could nitpick. It was indeed the truth.

I let out a short sigh and straightened up.

"Well, you don't need to worry about it too much. As long as we act like normal, then that would be the best thing, right?"

If we wanted to continue in the same way without changing, then we should do the same with our surroundings too. The bonds between people were easily breakable after all. It was a combination of internal and external factors.

Yuigahama repeated my words slowly.

"We should act normal too… yeah…"

She nodded despite not looking too confident and convinced.

I nodded as well in response.

This was our decision.

No, it was my decision.

But just one person didn't show signs of consent. Yukinoshita Yukino gazed directly at me. As I sat there feeling the pressure from her gaze, Yukinoshita slowly began to speak.

"Normal… I see, to you, *that* would be normal."

"…Yeah."

When I answered, Yukinoshita let out a small sigh.

"…You won't change, is that it?"

It felt like I had been told something like that before. But the meaning laced in those words back then was completely different. This time, her words had no warmth as if she had given up, as if something had ended.

Those words pricked at my chest.

"You… Um…"

Yukinoshita looked like she had trouble trying to say something as her words were cut off abruptly. Her eyes wandered around as if she was trying to look for the words she wanted to say.

—-Ahh, this was surely the continuation from before.

The words that she had swallowed back then, she was going to tell me them.

I relaxed my body that grew stiff unknowingly and waited for Yukinoshita to continue.

Yukinoshita gripped at her skirt. Her shoulders slightly shook. Finally looking determined, her throat began to move.

But, the words just wouldn't come out.

"Yu-Yukinon! U, Um, um you see……"

Yuigahama forcefully placed her mug on the table and hoping to talk, interrupted the conversation. It was as if she had a feeling that what Yukinoshita was going to say were words that shouldn't be said.

But that was nothing more than procrastination. The way she acted as if she was trying to pretend she didn't notice could only be seen as if she was trying to keep a secret under wraps.

The stagnant mood continued and the two tried to look for words to say, only to give birth to silence.

How much were they looking for? It definitely wasn't anything trivial. The only thing in motion was the small hand of the clock.

Still, the sound of knocking came from the door as if minding the ticking time.

We all faced the door, but no one spoke up.

Once more, there were more knocks to confirm.

"Come in."

The one who answered was me. I wasn't all that loud, but it seems it had reached past the door.

The door clattered open.

"Coming in."

The one who said that and came in was Hiratsuka-sensei.

Chapter 2

For some reason, **Isshiki Iroha** reeks of danger.

A rush of air blew in from the direction of the door that was left open.

Hiratsuka-sensei's long, glossy hair fluttered as the wind blew past her. She annoyingly brushed it away and entered the room with noisy steps.

"I'm here with a request for you guys, but…"

As she said that, she looked at us and immediately tilted her head in puzzlement.

"Did something happen?"

We all sat there without answering her question. Yuigahama looked away awkwardly while Yukinoshita sat there motionlessly with closed eyes.

Thanks to that, an odd silence filled the room which caused Hiratsuka-sensei to tilt her head again. She then looked at me with a confused expression.

"No, nothing at all."

With a straight look like that, even I wasn't mentally strong enough to just ignore her, so I calmly answered.

I tried to keep it as short as I could, but Hiratsuka-sensei still smiled bitterly. It looked like she had a faint idea of what was going on. Sure, with both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama dead silent, anyone could guess at what was happening.

"Maybe I should come back again?"

"Well, we don't mind either way."

"Either way, nothing would change" was the implied meaning. Whether it was tomorrow or the day after, this stagnating silence would continue regardless.

"…I see."

Looking as if she understood what the nuance of my tone was implying, Hiratsuka-sensei shrugged and let out a small sigh.

In order to avoid the mood from getting gloomy again, Yuigahama tried to smooth it over by asking a question.

"Sensei, was there something you need?"

"Ah, right… You can come in."

Hiratsuka-sensei turned towards the door and called out. With a softly spoken "excuse me", a person familiar with the room walked in quietly. She sported front pigtails held together by pins and her forehead was rather adorable.

It was the student council president, Meguri.

The person that followed after her was an unfamiliar girl student.

“We had a request so…”

Meguri cut her words short and turned to the girl student behind her.

With a little nudge, that girl took a step forward.

Her semi-long, flaxen hair swayed in sync with the step she took forward. With the color of her hair being seemingly all-natural, the cuticles on her fingers reflected the evening sun, dispersing the particles of light all over.

With her light hair and the largeness of her eyes, she resembled a small animal, giving her a cute appearance. Her uniform looked slightly worn out and she was slightly squeezing the cuffs of her cardigan that was somewhat rugged.

As I looked at her while thinking who the hell she was, she faced our way with a shy smile.

At that instant, I felt a torrent of ripples beating against my heart. Obviously, this wasn’t love at first sight. This was nothing more than a warning alert.

“Ah, Iroha-chan.”

When Yuigahama spoke up, that Iroha-chan person or whatever replied with an airy tone while slightly inclining her head.

“Yui-senpai, hellooo~.”

“Yahallo~!”

Both of them did a small wave in front of their chests.

“Ah, so you’re an acquaintance with Isshiki-san. Why don’t we skip the introductions then?”

After watching that exchange, Meguri-senpai nodded as she spoke.

Isshiki Iroha.

I've heard that name before.

I believe she was a first year serving as the manager of the soccer club. She was the girl Hayama got involved with in that weird Judo tournament event before summer vacation. Speaking of which, I wonder what happened with Miura at the time…

Or so I thought, but this wasn't the time to be digging into the past.

It looked like the request this time was related to Isshiki Iroha.

But that being the case, why was Meguri-senpai with her?

I looked at Meguri-senpai asking her to explain the situation and with a nod, she began to speak.

"Do you know about the upcoming student council election?"

So asked was the question, but I had no idea what she was talking about. As long school events did not force participation, there was absolutely no reason to give it the time of the day.

I made a sidelong glance without moving my head to check the reactions around me. When I did, Yuigahama quietly shook her head.

Well, it wasn't exactly an event worth getting excited about. It's a different story if you had a friend who planned to run for candidacy though. As a matter of fact, it was probably more common for people to go through their high school career without ever getting involved with the student council.

For the most part, the average student only recognizes the student council as "people who do stuff but I don't know what they do." Therefore, the election that was meant to choose those people to be members of the student council was along the same lines.

I would've been the same if it wasn't for having been involved in the school festival and athletic festival. I'm sure Yuigahama was guilty as charged as well.

But, there was one person who wasn't. Yukinoshita Yukino.

"Yes. I believe it was already publicly announced. I think the running candidates should have been as well."

"You sure know your stuff, Yukinoshita. Yep, yep, aside from the secretary not having a candidate, everything else was announced."

Meguri-senpai spoke while happily clapping her hands.

"We were supposed to do this a long time ago, but the lack of candidates caused it to be postponed. And without a suitable successor, I can't retire in peace too…"

Meguri-senpai broke down in tears in jest.

“The school more or less left it up to Shiromeguri, you see. That is, her replacement was supposed to have been chosen by the time of the athletic festival, but…”

“Oh no, not at all! Since the school I was recommended to is set in stone, the exams didn’t really matter all that much.”

Hiratsuka-sensei looked at her anxiously to which Meguri-senpai smiled and waved her hands.

Thinking on it, as obvious as it was, Meguri-senpai was indeed a third year. A few more months and she’d be gone from this school.

As I looked at Meguri-senpai while thinking that this warm, Megurin atmosphere was going to be a thing of the past, she looked like she realized she wasn’t done talking.

“Ah. Right, right, I should explain everything, hm? Anyway, for my last job as the president, I will be working with all of the current student council members in the election administration committee.”

In other words, there wasn’t a single person in the current council running for anything in the election, huh…

Well, I can imagine that the current council members found meaning in their jobs only when they worked together with Meguri-senpai. They all seemed to adore her very much too. Or maybe after they worked with us during the school festival and athletic festival that they thought “I’m so tired of the school festival~!” (without the black background) or something along those lines…

“And so, the elections and the edicts for that are over, but…”

“Edict…”

Yuigahama repeated with a small voice, but no one in particular explained it to her. Normally, Yukinoshita would have been the first one to notice, but she was lost in thought with her hand placed on her chin.

“An edict, at our school in particular, is the announcement of the election schedule along with the candidates running for a position. That’s more or less what it is if you think about it that way.”

Hiratsuka-sensei made sure she didn’t let that slide and followed through. Yuigahama thanked her while laughing it off.

“T-Thank you very much. Ahaha… S-So, so that edict or whatever, what’s that about?”

Yuigahama inquired after changing the subject. Meguri-senpai looked at Isshiki.

“Isshiki is a candidate in the student council president election.”

Ooh, so this was running for presidency huh… What a surprise or so I'd like to say, but quite frankly, Isshiki Iroha did not look the type to be interested in student council president activities.

So again, why are you running for presidency? Or so I thought as I stared at her but it looked like she noticed what my stare meant. Isshiki looked my way. She then blinked with surprise.

It looked like she was finally aware of my existence. Wait, no, she totally looked my way earlier… She probably thought I was an ornament or something. Like there'd be a room in this world that had something as novel as a totem pole.

However, Isshiki looked at me without the slightest hint of contempt or disgust. Instead, she looked like she realized something, tapped at her mouth, and smiled.

"Ah, did you think I was totally not fit for the role or something~?"

"Ah, no, not really. No way."

With that smile directed at me, I stumbled over my words.

Well, they did say that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover and it'd be silly to drop an anime just on the character designs alone. I averted my eyes from Isshiki in an attempt to throw away my preconceived notion of her.

When I did, Isshiki placed her hands on her hips and leaned forward with an upset and pouty expression and continued speaking.

"It's because I get told that sooo often that I more or less know what they're saying~. Like I look dumb or I look super dense or something."

Ah, this person was bad news, aye.

Her appearance alone suggested a playful attitude and she clearly had the typical adolescence associated with high school girls down. The thin make up that brought out her naturalness with her skirt slightly above her knees, the sleeves of the cream colored, baggy cardigan, and the alluring teasing of her collarbones hidden behind the loose ribbon at her collar that looked like a gap you could peek into.

Despite her fluffy appearance, she seemed to also be over familiar with her senior Yuigahama; amiableness based on something somewhere.

…As expected, she's dangerous.

Not only was she comfortable with the center of attention focused on her, she was blatantly showing off her status as a "high school girl". On the surface, she had a gentle disposition along with a humble femininity to her, but it didn't take any effort to see there was something superficial about it.

With my past experiences as the source of my confidence, the chances of this being a land mine was very high.

In the same way people who called themselves refreshing or said they had a dirty mouth were scum lacking in delicacy, people who went ahead and defined themselves despite no one asking, for the most part, tended to be good-for-nothing individuals. Self-proclaimed airheads followed this pattern.

While I'm on that subject, people who made the mysterious declaration that "I'm the type that makes the retorts!" were idiots who fell in this same category. Those self-proclaimed retorting types yell "oooooooooooooooooooooawait" in a conversation with a half-smile. They'd also continue on with "and, and, and?" while smiling stupidly. These types really sent chills up your spine. The level of irritation with these punks trying to act in this superficial manner was beyond normal. "Messing with people makes me interesting." There're plenty of guys with that misunderstanding, but their special characteristics were not only picking on people but getting incredibly angry. What's with this redundant explanation?

Well, it's basically that. There was some contradiction in my impression of Isshiki Iroha somewhere.

But, it looked like no one else other than me had this opinion of Isshiki. Well, maybe I was just overreacting.

"…So, may I ask what the problem is?"

Yukinoshita asked the silent Isshiki. She then unfolded her arms and placed them on the table. She may have gotten tired of waiting, evident in the irritation in her tone.

When Meguri noticed that she hadn't gotten into the heart of the matter, she quickly spoke up.

"Isshiki is a candidate for the student council president, but, that is, how should I put it…? She wants to avoid being elected."

Because she was still lost about how to put her words in the right terms, what she said sounded a bit vague. She's running for presidency, but she didn't want to be elected. I started thinking about the meaning behind those words.

"Haa… In short, you want to lose the election?"

If I took the facts at face-value, then that was what I concluded. When I asked, Meguri nodded her head. On the side listening was Yuigahama who tilted her head curiously while mumbling "hm?"

"Um… so you don't want to be the president?"

"Ah, yes. That's right."

It might have been because Isshiki was an acquaintance with Yuigahama that she was able to answer lightheartedly without a hint of shyness.

But if you looked at that from the side, you'd realize this wasn't anything good. Regardless of the circumstances, that wasn't the attitude of someone who decided to run for presidency in the election.

"…So why did you become a candidate?"

Yukinoshita spoke with a criticizing tone to which Isshiki winced.

"Um, I kinda didn't want to, er, rather I was kinda forced into it on a whim or something…"

Eeeh, which idol were you trying to be?

For some reason, Isshiki spoke bashfully causing my attitude to grow apathetic. But, Isshiki wasn't aware in the slightest of my stare, well, my existence actually, and with her fingers placed on her cheeks, took a thinking stance.

"I, like, stand out a looot, you see? I keep hearing about how I get along super good with Hayama-senpai and the other upper classman. And like, since I'm manager of the soccer club, that image is like kinda stuck on me."

I wasn't quite able to figure out what she was trying to get at so I tried my best to decrypt her words. And there was one thing that bothered me.

"…Are you getting bullied?"

"I wouldn't say that, but it's like it's getting too overboard or something~. Like when my classmates gather around, they keep poking at me and stuff."

Isshiki tapped her chin with her index finger and pin as she spoke. As she continued to talk in her excessively long way, my head started to hurt.

So what in the hell was she trying to say…?

"So like, I think this time is the same way or something~"

I totally got you. Nope, I didn't.

I didn't get it, but to summarize: "A person like me who gets picked on a lot kinda just got carried away and am now running for the stucco presidency!" It was probably somewhere along those lines. It was like one of those long titles some books were given…

The scenario of getting thrown into an outrageous situation because people got carried away without bother to think about their own actions was quite common. This time, it looks like the errors of youth had brought about this result.

But I gotta say, she was that.

…She was definitely the type to be hated by girls.

Even I get it. Like totally.

She was that, indeed.

She was one of those bitches who tried to hide their goofy, airheaded nature. A bitch that got too comfortable with people. There were plenty of those back in middle school. Yep, the ones that led the guys around by the nose. I thought they were all jugglers at the time.

Even Grander Musashi wouldn't go after that bait. Rather, the fishing that he did made you wonder what kind of lure he was using.

No matter how carried away they got, it was likely that a good amount of spite was mixed in.

"Then again, can you just randomly run for candidacy like that?"

When Yuigahama raised her hand with a question, Miss Hiratsuka crossed her arms and let out a short sigh.

"When the candidacy papers were turned in, the person in charge didn't actually confirm it…"

"Erg… If only we election administrators were more alert…"

Meguri groaned with shame. The election administrators were the staff members in charge of managing the election. Mutsu, Nagato, and Kongo[1] were all irrelevant here.

Miss Hiratsuka pattered Meguri's shoulder whose head was hung in shame.

"Well, no one would expect someone to do something like this as a prank. It'd be a little cruel to be blaming the election administration now, wouldn't it?"

"We even made sure to check the endorsement list too though."

Meguri spoke with a downhearted tone and within those words, a word I've never heard of came up and I asked about it.

"Endorsement list?"

"Uh huh. To run as a candidate, you need a certain number of endorsement signatures and that was properly satisfied too."

Huh, so first, you need endorsement signatures.

But, that was a convincing story. I mean, if you think about how someone with zero popularity decided to become the president, there'd be problems if a bunch of those types of guys suddenly ran in the election. It was a simple system created to eliminate the weaker candidates.

Which means for the side that was taking the applications, this was a must condition. You could also say that as long you had that condition secured, you were eligible to run for candidacy.

Considering the messed up ambitions of the current members of the student council, I imagine none of them thought people would make a prank out of false candidacy applications.

In this world, there were times when an idiot would go beyond your imagination so it was a little scary.

"Still, this is rather complicated. I believe you needed more than thirty signatures to be qualified."

I wasn't the only one who shuddered at the thought as Yukinoshita did as well. Her tone also seemed to drop slightly as well.

"That much? I'm surprised they managed to get that much…"

Yuigahama spoke with a half surprise and half scared tone.

But, it wasn't anything that strange.

It just meant that it was easier to gather signatures with ill intent than good intent. If it was for the sake of lynching Isshiki who was in over her head, then that'd work too. In the same way it was as easy to retweet on Twitter, it might have applied to writing someone's name down on a piece of paper. Essentially, it was a malicious version of slacktivism if you will.

As I sat there wondering why, Miss Hiratsuka had a slightly troubled expression.

"Of course, we checked it over with the students. Whether it was a fortunate turn of events or not, all thirty names were authentic."

"Writing their actual names on there, are they idiots or what…?"

"They likely didn't think it'd turn into something important. A deficiency in their imagination, I suppose."

Miss Hiratsuka spoke with a bitter smile.

Well, true enough. There's been a lot of that recently actually. Things like uploading a picture of being inside the refrigerator at your part time job or tweeting a picture of a prank at a food and drinks store. There were also those who published their real name and faces online boasting about their crimes; wasn't that just making yourself a wanted criminal?

"Um, couldn't you just invalidate it? Something like a procedure to invalidate the candidacy?"

When Yuigahama spoke, Isshiki took a quick step forward. She then began to speak in a passionate manner.

"The thing is, you see, my homeroom teacher was really into it and stuff so he's like totally cheering me on and all. When I said I didn't want to, he ended up encouraging me instead… There wasn't even a person in class that would do a campaign speech either so I don't really know, you see~… I mean, for the most part, it was just the teacher cheering me on, that's all."

Ah, it was basically that. It's that same pattern where your boss fervently tries to keep you employed when you said you wanted to quit the job. "Let's do our best! Together and beyond!" They'd shout this out loud because they didn't have enough hands on deck and they wouldn't let this chance slip by. So they'd try to persuade you from quitting in the warmest and nicest way possible. And from there, if you hesitated for a second, halfway through, your boss would get absurdly

upset and tell you “that’s a real problem you see, if you’re going to be like that, there won’t be a next time you see?” and start lecturing you.

In the end, you lost the chance to quit your job and you’d end up looking like you were trying to avoid responsibility (distant eyes)…

Next to Isshiki was Miss Hiratsuka who scratched her cheek with a troubled expression.

“I did try speaking with Isshiki’s homeroom teacher, but… well, he’s the type to not listen to other people.”

“Aah, I see…”

I more or less surmised the scenario and acknowledged her words. Miss Hiratsuka had an unpleasant look as she dropped her sight towards her feet.

“Apparently, he had already prepared a moving story to go with the election, you see… By helping a student with no confidence in becoming the student council president with the support of his classmates and teachers, it’d turn into a story passed down the generations…”

Aah, so he was that kind of person… As long as they did something good, he was convinced there was nothing bad about that person.

“So, with that being a problem, she spoke to Shiromeguri about it.”

As such, it went like this: Meguri heard the story directly from Isshiki and unable to figure out a way to deal with it, they went to Miss Hiratsuka which was then brought to us.

“Then, I guess withdrawing your candidacy might be a little too difficult then.”

Isshiki’s homeroom teacher probably wasn’t aware of this either. But that wasn’t the only problem. Meguri played with her pigtails anxiously.

“Uh huh… So… now we’re just wondering if we can withdraw at all…”

“Haa…”

I started thinking about whether there was a reason for this. However, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin and seemingly put whatever she was thinking about in order, she slowly began to talk.

“Regarding the withdrawal of the candidacy, is it because there isn’t anything officially written about it in the election rules?”

Having said that, Meguri blinked with surprise.

“Yukinoshita, you sure know your stuff… That’s right. There’s nothing written about it in the first place…”

I see. Well, sure enough, people who wanted to go work for the student council were, without a doubt, people full of ambition. I imagine they didn’t even

bother to think it would be necessary to write down about how to withdraw as a rule either. But still, that's the Yukipedia for you. All knowing as per usual.

"Ah, wouldn't it be enough to say she can't become the student council president because she's a first year?"

Yuigahama raised her hand as she spoke.

However, Yukinoshita had a sullen expression as she turned her head.

"…It wouldn't."

"Eh? Why not?"

Yuigahama asked in puzzlement. Meguri answered that question with an empty smile.

"That's not in the rules either… There isn't anything regarding a restriction of second years only for student council presidents written down."

"Basically, student council presidents tended to be second years out of custom."

Yukinoshita added, convincing Yuigahama. She then had a troubled expression.

It was essentially an unspoken rule, but as long as it wasn't officially stipulated, then it wouldn't serve as a pretext to get out of candidacy.

If we couldn't do anything legally with the holes in the protocols, then the only thing left was in accordance with how the election was run.

"If she doesn't want to do it, then she can just lose the election. Actually, that's the only way."

This was the surefire method. It didn't matter how much you wanted to be the president as long you didn't have the support to win the election. So the most effective method was to lose the election to avoid becoming the student council president.

But, Meguri dropped her eyes.

"Umm… Actually, the only one running in the election is Isshiki so…"

Yukinoshita continued right after.

"So that means a vote of confidence."

"Right, so it's pretty much set in stone…"

A vote of confidence was a system that takes place when there was only a single candidate in the entire running. Unlike the normal system of choosing a person amongst a number of other candidates, this system was simpler in that you simply circle yes or no on a vote ballot in regards to whether you should leave the position of student council president to that one candidate.

With this system, people tended to just circle yes and be done with it. Of course, there were people who circled no for the hell of it because it'd be interesting but they were the minority. As long the majority had expressed their trust in the candidate, barring any extraordinary circumstances, it was more or less decided.

But, even so.

"Well, if it's just losing, there is a way to do…"

As I let out what I was thinking, Isshiki didn't like the sound of it and pouted.

"Like, wait a second, losing a vote of confidence would be supeeeer lame! I mean, a vote of confidence is just lame in the first place… That's too embarrassing. No way!"

Ugh, so self-centered. It's exactly because of that personality that you were forced into this situation, you know?

Or so I thought for a second, but in truth, Isshiki wasn't at fault for arbitrarily being thrown into the forefront. Putting aside the silly details of how she managed to get into this position in the first place, being forced into the role of student council president only to lose because of a vote of no confidence would make for a funny story. That's why, I guess I could understand where she's coming from. There was no way you could be satisfied with something that the majority agreed on against you.

That's why just losing wasn't something she could do.

"Only the names of the candidates will show up right?"

In order to get my thoughts sorted out, I checked with Meguri on some facts.

"Eh? Yes, that's right."

"So that means there isn't a person who'd do the campaign speech for Isshiki."

"Right, right."

Meguri's eyes met with mine and she nodded. But in that head of hers was a question mark indicating that she hadn't realized what I meant.

But that was fine. All the information I needed was at my disposal.

"In that case, there's one quick and easy method."

"Um, what do you mean?"

Asked to clarify, I laid out the facts one by one.

"At worst, even if Isshiki clearly lost the vote of confidence, as long she didn't get hurt in the process, then that should be fine. In short, if they understand that the reason she lost the vote of confidence was out of her control, then that should be enough."

"Can you really do that?"

Silent the entire time, Yuigahama asked a question.

I nodded my head.

“If the campaign speech serves as the reason for her loss, then Isshiki won’t be the center of attention.”

All we needed to do was simply just sidestep the cause of her defeat, why she was rejected, and why she was denied.

With that in mind, we still had some options left.

Before I got into the details of the plan, I cut off my words for a moment.

I wanted to get my thoughts in order. I wanted to catch my breath and take control of the flow of the conversation. But those weren’t the reasons why I stopped talking.

It’s because I noticed that the room was submerged in an uneasy silence.

Yuigahama looked at me with still, painful eyes and lowered her head as if she drank something incredibly bitter. Noticing this change, Meguri rotated her look between Yuigahama and me in confusion. Isshiki seemed to be sensitive to the change in the mood and stood there in discomfort.

And then, there was a small clanking sound.

When I turned reflexively in the direction of the sound, Yukinoshita had placed her arms on the table. It looked like the button on the cuffs of her blazer had clashed with the table when she unfolded her arms.

In this dead silence, that sound was awfully louder than it should have.

Then, in the silent room, Yukinoshita’s cold voice reverberated.

“I can’t agree with that kind of method.”

With a harsh and critical tone, I moved my eyebrows and asked her instead.

“Your reason being?”

“…It’s–”

I wasn’t planning to sound forceful, but my tone grew sharp regardless. Yukinoshita averted her gaze for a quick moment. Her long eyelashes not only flickered but quietly shook.

But that was only for an instant. She quickly returned to looking at me, but this time I could I feel a strong will behind her eyes.

“…It’s because it’s not guaranteed. It’s not absolutely certain that she will receive a vote of no confidence. Also, you’re only going to cause trouble for Isshiki-san by purposely botching up her campaign speech just so can she receive those votes. In the off-chance that the majority votes with no confidence, do you honestly think they will bother to run another election? Despite there never being such a precedence in the past? And… And also, there was never that much interest

in the student council in the first place, so no one will mind if we just publicize only the results… In other words, if there's enough people willing, it can easily be done."

As I was caught by her sharp gaze, Yukinoshita spoke rapidly. It was like she wanted to express every reason she could think of.

Having seen that, Miss Hiratsuka chided her with a kind tone.

"Yukinoshita."

"…That was rude of me. I'll take that back."

As Yukinoshita forced out those words, Meguri lowered her head and shook her head with a smile.

Her words were certainly rude. That is, the intended meaning of "if there's enough people willing, then the administration and the school can handle the aftermath" was rude to Meguri who was working as one of the election administrators.

A creaking sound from a chair could be heard.

When I turned my head in the direction of the sound, Yuigahama was facing me. But even though we were facing each other, our eyes weren't.

"Hey, about that speech, who's going to do it…? I don't think I really like that."

It was a weak and delicate tone that unpleasantly stayed in my ears.

"That's… Anyone that's able seems fine to me."

Although I said that, it was clear who was the one most suitable for this job. It was absolutely unnecessary to declare who the person was with the highest success rate of making this plan work.

With the sun coming down, the shadows of the room started to grow in size. The artificially created light from the class lights slowly began to fill the room.

Yukinoshita, who was looking down the entire time, suddenly raised her face.

"Shiromeguri. In the case where Isshiki withdraws from the position, another candidate will be needed, correct?"

"Yes, that's right…"

When Meguri answered, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh and spoke.

"Then, the only thing left is to find another candidate and support him so he can win the election."

"If there was someone raring to go with the position, then they should have been candidates already. There's clearly something wrong there. Don't tell me you're going to talk to people one by one for their support?"

"But, um, if we just talk to the people who'd lend us a hand, then…"

Yuigahama answered in fragments while trying to think.

"…Fine. So let's say we did find someone willing to run for the position. But can that person win against this first year here? I'm sure you're already aware, but high school student council elections are essentially popularity votes."

I glanced at Isshiki.

This was a surprisingly high hurdle to overcome.

A quick peek at Isshiki and you'd see that she was cute. Normally speaking, it was fine to even call her a beautiful girl. With a playful, cheerful, gentle, and bright demeanor, it was pretty likely she was a hit amongst the guys in the school.

In high school student council elections, the main issue didn't lie with the campaign pledge or manifesto.

Regardless of what school system reformations they had promised to make, everyone fully understood that there was a small chance of them ever happening. Things like coming to school with casual clothes or loosening up the school regulations or even freeing up the rooftop were things they'd talk about in the election, but there really never was a precedent where any of these campaign promises actually came to light.

That meant that the name of the game was one of the following: a candidate's popularity or a candidate's ability to round up an organization to get voted to office.

With that kind of popularity contest in mind, the ones that came directly to mind that could win these types of contests easily would be Hayama and Miura. But, Hayama was part of the soccer club, president even, and Miura as the student council president just didn't fit her image either.

So that meant we needed to lower the bar a bit when looking for a capable individual, but the chances of that dropped considerably.

Not to mention, it wasn't as simple as asking the person and being done with it.

There was still another big problem left.

"Before the day of the election, there are things like picking cabinet members, promoting the campaign, and other election activities. Do you think you can do all of that by then? You have to be doing them with the intention of winning too. If you have something else realistic in mind, then by all means. But given the current situation, I don't see that being possible at all."

I spoke with full confidence that it was impossible. The calmer I tried to talk, the deeper the tone of my voice started to sound. I wasn't trying to come off as critical, but my tone clearly said otherwise.

"Um, Hikigaya?"

With a look of surprise, Meguri called out to me. Taking a step back to look at myself, I realized I was irritated.

"…"

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were both silent.

Both of them were already fully aware of what the implications were despite whether I had voiced them or not. A little thinking and a little knowledge of how the school operated was enough to understand what was going on.

Even so, we continued to be quiet because we couldn't come up with a clear answer to the problem.

The awkward atmosphere lingered in the room.

At the corner of my eyes, Isshiki was sighing in exhaustion. Isshiki was exposing her unpleasant attitude that clearly indicated she didn't want to be in here.

Watching someone who was tired gets you tired too. I unconsciously sighed occasionally in this silence.

"Doesn't look like we're getting a solution any time soon."

Miss Hiratsuka, who was leaning against the wall the entire time, spoke up and energetically distanced herself from the wall. As if that was a signal, we switched our crossed legs and did a little stretching.

After Yukinoshita corrected her sitting posture, she called out to Meguri.

"…Shiromeguri, could you come back another time?"

"Eh, ah, okay… Sure, no problem."

Meguri who responded with a mix of bewilderment was pushed from behind by Miss Hiratsuka.

"Well then, let's continue this another day. Shiromeguri, Isshiki. Let's get going."

Just as she was about to push the two out of the room, Yukinoshita called out. Her expression was much colder than the usual, giving you a passionate impression.

"Miss Hiratsuka. Do you have a moment?"

"Ah, then, we'll be going then."

Realizing what was going on, Meguri took Isshiki and left the room. After seeing them off, Miss Hiratsuka turned towards us.

"Okay then, let's hear what you have to say."

After pulling out a chair, she sat down with her legs crossed.

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Just a little longer and the room would become darker. In contrast, the sky outside the window was dyed with a crimson red.

As we approached closer to the winter solstice, the evening would inch earlier and earlier day by day.

Miss Hiratsuka waited motionlessly for Yukinoshita to start.

The tea on the table had already lost all its warmth and the candy prepared was left untouched.

The hands of the clock continued to move and occasionally you would hear someone sighing in exhaustion. An unknown amount of time had passed and eventually, Yukinoshita spoke up.

"There was something that I just remembered."

"Ah? What is it?"

Without answering me, Yukinoshita faced Miss Hiratsuka.

"Has there been a clear winner so far?"

"Winner?"

When asked, Miss Hiratsuka blinked. Yuigahama and I did as well. The word "winner" that was brought up suddenly caused us to tilt our head in confusion.

But, thinking about it for a little made me realize what she was talking about.

To us, the winner in this case would refer to the match we had been involved in a while back.

Which of us could solve the most troubles or in other words, who we could serve the most. And the winner had the right to make the loser do whatever they wanted.

It was something I was thrown into the moment I joined this club.

"Um… winner?"

Yuigahama peeked at us as she asked.

Speaking of which, this contest did have a new rule added to it.

"It's a match of who can serve people the best, in other words, who can solve the problems of others the most. It doesn't matter who you ask for help in accomplishing the objective. If you win, the other person has to do whatever you want them to."

When I explained it in simple terms, Yuigahama spoke, half surprised and half confused.

"There was something like that…"

It looked like Miss Hiratsuka didn't explain it to her. Well, I could guess at why she didn't do so.

Taking a look at the culprit who started this contest, Miss Hiratsuka was flustered.

“R-Right…”

She crossed her arms and groaned while twisting her head.

“I-I wonder huh~. W-Well, you know, you guys have been working together for a lot of the requests and all~. Yep. Everyone’s doing a nice job, yep.”

“…”

Yukinoshita’s cold expression didn’t falter as she continued to look at Miss Hiratsuka in silence.

“….Haa.”

Miss Hiratsuka sighed with exhaustion. It looked like she was trying to change the subject, but she gave in to the pressure of that serious look. But, that’s true. Recently, there were a lot of things that came up that made it hard to decide who the winner was. Most of the problems that had been settled were done as the service club and not as individuals.

Even so, Yukinoshita wasn’t going to let this ambiguity continue any further. As Yukinoshita continued with her intensity, Miss Hiratsuka faced her.

“Aside from the first task, you guys have been doing things in places that I wasn’t aware of. Strictly speaking, I’m a little reluctant to give you a proper judgment right now. It’s just…”

“It’s just?”

When she stopped abruptly, Yukinoshita asked further. Miss Hiratsuka looked at each of us in turn and slowly spoke.

“My bias and my own personal judgment. Those two are factors in what I will have to say. So essentially, it’ll be judgments based on you three alone.”

“I don’t mind… You two are fine with that too, right?”

Yukinoshita looked at us with a side glance.

I didn’t have a problem with it. Yuigahama looked like she wasn’t exactly sure what was going on but nodded anyway.

Having confirmed our responses, Miss Hiratsuka nodded again.

“If we’re talking about just the results alone, then Hikigaya is one step further. If we consider the process and what happens afterwards, then Yukinoshita is ahead. Anyhow, there were also other things that wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for Yuigahama’s contribution, but…”

That was a surprising evaluation. It was more than I thought.

If I thought about it in more detail, there were plenty of places where I was inferior, but the ruling was quite different from what I thought it’d be.

As I moved my glance towards the other two to see what their reaction was, Yuigahama was lost in deep thought thinking about something quietly.

On the other hand, Yukinoshita sat there straight with her eyes closed and didn't move an inch. And then she spoke with an emotional, monotonous tone.

"…So, that means the match hasn't been decided yet."

"That's what it comes down to."

Miss Hiratsuka answered to which Yukinoshita continued to press for more.

"If the match is still ongoing, then there won't be a problem with our opinions being divided this time, correct?"

"…Um, what do you mean?"

Yuigahama's shoulders slightly shrunk in anxiety.

In the same way, I didn't understand the meaning behind Yukinoshita's words and waited for her to continue speaking.

Yukinoshita looked at Yuigahama but not me and spoke.

"It means that him and I aren't required to do things the same way."

It was exactly as Yukinoshita said. In the first place, we weren't obligated to work with each other. There wasn't one time where we worked together well. I thought that was just how we were.

"Well, that seems right. There isn't any point in trying to cooperate out of necessity."

"…Yes."

Yukinoshita replied with a short answer. The conversation was over. Miss Hiratsuka took those words into consideration for a moment, but ultimately sighed in resignation.

"Guess there's no helping it. You guys should do as you please then. So until the problem is solved, what about the club?"

Once asked, Yukinoshita answered instantly without hesitation as if she already knew what she was going to do with the club.

"You have the freedom to come to the club if you like."

"…Well, that's the correct decision."

Hiratsuka-sensei looked convinced. At the very least, the way we were now, there wouldn't be any meaning for us to sit in this room silently. If we're going to be doing things our own way, there wasn't a need for us to gather in this room. That's why I had no qualms regarding this decision.

I picked up my bag and left the seat that was always on the other end of the table.

“I’ll be heading home then.”

“Ah, w-wait a second!”

Yuigahama stood up with the chair clattering noisily. I stopped Yuigahama who looked like she was going to head my way.

“…You should think about what you should do too.”

“Eh…”

Yuigahama stood there motionless. Does she really know what I mean? I mean, there were other times like this anyway.

More than likely, we had to think about what would happen in the future.

As she stood there, I turned my back on her and headed for the door.

There was a sigh directed at my back.

“We were both supposed to have hated the act of getting along with others just for show…”

I turned my head naturally in response to Yukinoshita’s words.

With no words that could possibly answer to that seemingly sad smile without the slightest hint of self-deprecation, I silently closed the door behind me.

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I repositioned the heavy, flinging bag around my shoulders and walked down the empty hallway. The sound of footsteps reverberated throughout the hall quite nicely.

Looking at the school campus from the window, you could see the sport clubs still in their activities.

Eventually, they finally started cleaning up along with some after-exercise stretches. The expansive field started to gradually submerge in shadows.

As I continued to walk along while watching that shadow, emotional footsteps could be heard chasing me from behind.

“Hikigaya.”

Called out, I stopped at that moment. The owner of the voice was someone I knew. That’s why I stood there in place without turning my head.

Miss Hiratsuka sped up her pace and stood next to me.

“I imagine it’d be pointless to ask but…”

She combed her long hair roughly with a small complaint. That’s the teacher for you, quite all foreseeing.

But, it was something that she had to ask no matter what. We both descended the stairs.

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing at all.”

I wasn’t sure how many times I had said that already.

If I were to continue repeating those same words over and over again, I thought I wouldn’t feel that way anymore. Instead, I’d just end up having doubts about my own words.

As if Miss Hiratsuka knew or didn’t know about that feeling, she smiled bitterly.

“I see. Well, that’s fine. I didn’t think you’d be honest enough to answer anyway.”

And from then on, she never asked another question. Miss Hiratsuka and I continued down the stairs and into the hallway in silence. Around the next corner was the faculty office and straight ahead would be the front entrance.

As we approached the point where we would go our separate ways, before I could say anything, Miss Hiratsuka spoke first.

“You are kind after all… There were a lot of people you saved too.”

“No, that’s…”

I thought that was different. Kindness or saving people were things that were not meant for me. I wasn’t a human capable of that.

Besides, people simply don’t just save people for the sake of it. What they really did was look for someone beneath them and get into a mood to help them. By discovering a meaning behind a person’s actions, they use it to comfort themselves.

That’s why I didn’t do anything at all.

I wanted to deny what she said but with a light wink, Miss Hiratsuka stopped me.

“It’s from the evaluation earlier.”

“…Quite the overestimate, don’t you think?”

I retorted back, but Miss Hiratsuka puffed out her chest with pride.

“I may look like this, but I’m the type to play favorites.”

“Is that what a teacher should be doing?”

“It’s my very own praising policy, you see.”

She said it without a hint of shyness. So that’s how it was… I don’t remember being praised all that much though…

“That’s kind of hard to see …”

I shrugged my shoulders as I said that and Miss Hiratsuka smiled.

“Of course, I make sure to scold just as much.”

The school building that was designed to mirror that of a ship with many windows was illuminated by the evening sun. In the silent hallway reflected was the gentle setting sun. But, the light of the sun was by no means warm.

Miss Hiratsuka stood on the opposite end of where the light shone in, blocking the sunlight.

She began to walk in the opposite direction of the front entrance towards the faculty office. In the moment that she passed me, she lightly patted my shoulders.

“With the way you handle things, when you meet someone you really want to save, you won’t be able to at all.”

The sound of a single footstep echoed in the hallway.

That sound gradually grew farther and farther.

Chapter 3

No matter where, **Yukinoshita Haruno** doesn't know where the bottom is.

The bicycle tried to overtake the shadows.

It was a little past evening as it began to get dark along the street lined with trees. With the sun setting into the Tokyo Bay from behind, I stepped on the pedals of my bike.

Starting tomorrow, I'll be able to go home earlier.

Attending the service club was now optional temporarily.

With a battle royal rule in effect, since the way I handled things differed from the two in the club, there wasn't a need to force ourselves to work together. I was already set on what I planned to do and it actually didn't require any preparation beforehand. It was fine as long as I managed something on the day of the event.

That being the case, the only thing I could do before the day of the vote was not get in the way of the two.

Even more so.

Even if I didn't do anything, as long as those two did something, then that was good. There's no doubt they'd solve the problem more effectively than I could.

We both chose to not interfere with each other.

There wasn't a need for us to tread that thin rope just for the sake of getting closer. Preserving an adequate distance between another was a way for people to get along with each other, after all.

I decided to stop thinking about anything related to the club.

But humans were mysterious creatures. Whenever you wanted to free your mind from all thoughts, you ended up thinking about troublesome things instead.

In trying to consciously shift my thinking from school, I naturally ended up thinking about home instead. And what came to mind was this morning's exchange with Komachi.

She's probably still mad…

Seeing her angry expression was quite cute in itself, but when she started ignoring people, then that was proof she was really upset. My dad cried to my mom when Komachi ignored him.

My parents were likely to come home late as always. That meant I'd be alone with Komachi at home.

Normally, being alone with my sister at home was a situation that made my heart aflutter. Okay, maybe that really wasn't normal.

But it was a little hard to face each other today in particular.

It might be better to be on the down low and let her cool down a bit.

So with that in mind, I turned the handle of my bike to the right.

If I head right on the national highway from the street that I took home from school, then I would make it to Chiba. It was a city that had a movie theater with a book store, arcade, and a manga café that would serve to be good time killers.

On the field trip, I didn't have very many chances to enjoy alone time while walking around peacefully. Even the holidays we had ended with me just idling about.

And now, I could finally spread my wings. I was always a person who liked being alone after all.

As I thought about where I should kill some time, I gradually grew more relaxed.

As I hummed "princess, princess, princess ", I stepped on my pedals and continued down the long highway.

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When I made it to Chiba, it was already past evening with the sun setting down. The city was beginning to show off its night face. I continued down the 14th of the highway to the center of the city in the direction of the central station.

In this area, there were plenty of places to kill time; Animate, Tora no Ana, movie theaters, and more.

I cooled off at a few stores, bought two to three books, and took a look at the display windows in front of the movie theater.

The movie I had interest in was going to show in an about an hour so I had free time to kill. As a matter of fact, this free time was perfect for a drink of coffee somewhere.

Down the block from the movie theater was a Starbucks. I considered going, but I had absolutely no clue how ordering worked there. Also, I honestly couldn't get used to that atmosphere of hip enjoyment that many of the customers seem to be submerged in. I decided to choose another place. I had no words that could describe that destructive feeling when you see a fashionable guy with glasses tapping away on his Macbook Air. "I'll smash that damn Apple product and you together, four-eyes!" or something along those lines.

If it was that donuts shop diagonally opposite from the movie theater, I could get refills there. Café au lait's were also applicable for refills as well. In fact,

sweeting up the café au lait and drinking it afterwards made it even more Chiba-esque which was even better. It's important to treasure your tea time, uh huh!

I entered the store and I ordered an Old Fashioned, French cruller, and a café au lait. I went up to the seats on the second floor, aiming for a counter seat.

Oh man, the bliss of being able to read while scrunching on sweet foods and drinking a sweetened café au lait truly was a dangerous thing. Even the idols thought so. If they were hurt by small words, then eating sweets would make them happy, dear me![1]

As I looked around cheerfully for a seat, a figure looking in my direction entered the corners of my vision.

"Oh, it's quite rare to see you around here."

When I turned my head in the direction of the voice, the woman took off her headphones, smiled, and waved her hands.

She had a white blouse with popped collars covered by a coarse, knitted cardigan and even though she was wearing a long skirt, her long, supple legs were underneath. It was supposed to be a winter outfit but it felt like she was dressed up lightly. This may have been because of the typical light impression you'd get from her any other time.

This woman was the perfect superhuman who not only surpassed the current club president of the service club, Yukinoshita Yukino, but also was said person's older sister. Yukinoshita Haruno.

Being in a donuts shop like this didn't fit her image very much. On the other hand, if she had situated herself in one of those front window seats at Starbucks, she would make for a pretty good portrait.

Because I wasn't expecting to meet anyone in a place like this, my body involuntarily stiffened up.

When I took a peek at Haruno-san, there were a number of books spread out on top of the table. That wasn't to say they were all paperback books as there was a big, decorated bound book in the center. It seemed to be an alphabets book on a quick glance, but it may have been just a Western book.

"…Ah, hello."

I quickly greeted her and sat somewhere a distance away. Still, why was it that before you say something, you start off with "ah"? Was this an attempt at using English vocabulary?

In any case, I wolfed down my French cruller.

Damn it… Why the hell are you here… I should've opted for take-out… What a blunder… I should've checked for any acquaintances before heading inside the store.

Anyway, I need to finish this quickly and leave.

That was what I thought as I tried to finish my café au lait, but unfortunately, I was the owner of a cat's tongue.

As I blew desperately at my drink to cool it down, Haruno-san sat next to me with a tray in hand.

"You didn't have to run away like that. Gosh, so rude!"

"Ah, no, no, I just thought it'd be bad to get in your way and all."

This may have been consideration from a loner. When you go to the city by yourself and come across someone you know and exchange a few words here and there, it becomes a bizarre situation where you have the thoughts "so how should I wrap up this conversation and leave…?" It was similar to how you become apologetic for making the mood worse.

One must retreat from the situation immediately in the face of unforeseen happenings. Drop your pride and get out of there.

However, for a person like Haruno-san whose personal space was quite narrow, that kind of thinking did not apply to her. She sat in the same way she did earlier across from me with a book in hand. With a quick flip, she opened up the book to the page she was reading moments ago.

If she was just going to keep reading, did she really have to take the trouble to just sit next to me…?

As I looked at her, I thought "she sure is a free individual". With her eyes still glued to the book, Haruno-san began talking to me.

"What are you up to?"

"…Watching movies and stuff to kill time."

"Oh what do you know, I'm kinda doing the same thing."

"…You're going to watch a movie?"

I unconsciously spoke with a bitter tone. But that, too, couldn't be helped. After all, if we were going to watch the same movie, then breaking up here only to meet up again at the movie theater would be annoyingly awkward…

But that may have been needless worrying on my part since Haruno-san answered cheerfully.

"Mm? Oh, no, no. I mean killing some time until I go eat with my friends."

Speaking of which, the college Haruno-san attended was close rather close to here. I think it was supposed to be in west Chiba somewhere. I think that area didn't have that very many hipster stores, but there were definitely bars. If you wanted to get some dinner somewhere, then it wouldn't be weird to head down to Chiba. Speaking of exquisite foods… naritake maybe? I mean, that layer of fattiness looked like snow covering up the landscape after all! So exquisite!

“Haa, with friends. Well, I wouldn’t want to get in your way so I’ll take my leave here.”

“That’s a little later. C’mon, let’s kill some time together, please~!”

She slid the chair over and squeezed her way closer to me. Too close, too close, so soft, too close, too closmells good, too close… Whenever she’d get closer, I’d try to back off. But whenever she saw me twist myself to get away, she’d only close the gap again.

And then, she whispered into my ears.

“Hikigaya-kun, your type is definitely the best type out there.”

Cold chills ran up my spine instantly. It wasn’t something simple like fear. After you fell down, you would look ahead into that dark hole to see how much farther you were going to drop; it was similar to this kind of pleasure. The soft feeling of her fingers as they gripped my shoulders, the tempting accents in her voice that caught my attention, and those glossy lips of hers.

When I threw my head back on reflex and looked at Haruno-san, her moist eyes met with mine. That suspicious smile of hers did make me want to let her do as she pleases and fool me, but she was probably enjoying this kind of reaction out of me too.

That became apparent when Haruno-san backed off and laughed hysterically.

“You stay quiet and you don’t talk to the other person. But when someone talks to you, you end up answering, don’t you? Yep, super convenient. You’re the best when it comes to killing time.”

It didn’t feel like there were any hints of praise in those words at all… Those specs were definitely worse than those recent browser games too. You know, like recently, those games where you just leave them alone, they’d still talk to you. Like Kancolle or something.

Haruno-san went back to reading. She added some words moments before.

“Guys in general try too hard when they want to get a conversation going. It’s a little sad to see, you know?”

…Aaaah, I totally get it… Aaah.

Like totally, those guys who were so desperate to get a girl to like them by blabbering about a lot of things. Normally, they don’t say squat, but lo’ and behold, given the chance and they’d suddenly get superficially courageous and try to lead the conversation only to not talk about anything worthwhile and bam, that was the end; those types of guys. That was seriously, super sad. So, which middle school period of me was this?

Anyways, no thanks to Haruno-san’s behavior, I missed the timing to go home. At this point, I may have to wait for another chance to come up again.

I just had to sit here quietly and there wouldn't be any problems. In fact, being quiet was a specialty of mine.

It's basically that. As expected, silent men were way better.

Here it comes… It's time. It's time for the period of loners. From here on, boys who don't make conversation will make it big (and I don't mean it in a popular way).

As long as I continued to stay quiet and not talk, there'd be no conversations at all.

The time continued to pass by comfortably.

I thought for a bit and realized that the last time I met with Haruno-san was at the culture festival.

But my impression of her was completely different from back then. This may have been because she was acting more docile than she was before. No, maybe I should say acting more like an adult.

Apparently, as long as Yukinoshita wasn't around, Haruno-san wouldn't act so cheeky. Instead, she was really calm. Then again, how much does she love her little sister anyway? I mean, I love my little sister just as much too, you know? Well, I guess she probably hated my guts now from this morning though…

The incident with Komachi this morning suddenly came to mind and I got a little depressed. It was times like these where thinking of other things would help.

Aah, these donuts are so gooood… But the café au lait might not be sweet enough. Dear me, did I forget to put milk in it? Using sugar sticks in place of milk, I shook the packs in my café au lait and as I was drinking it, Haruno-san was visible at the corner of my eyes.

Laid out on the table were books and sometimes she'd reach out for coffee while resting her chin on her hands.

Still, seeing her sit quietly while reading a book really resembled Yukinoshita.

Her fingers that turned the page, a slight glimpse of the back of her white nape as she drank from her cup, and the narrowing of her eyes as she looked at a certain word in her book.

She resembled the girl I've known for close to half a year, Yukinoshita Yukino.

Suddenly, Haruno-san noticed my stare and raised her face slightly, sending me a question with "hm?" asking if I had something to say.

I shook my head to that.

"…Er, I was going to ask for another filling."

"Mm, please do."

She passed me her cup and I asked for a refill of the café au lait and coffee from the closest waiter. The waiter took the cup and placed the refilled cup next to Haruno-san without distracting her.

I thought it'd be a bit weird to always be staring at Haruno-san, so I decided to take out one of the books I bought earlier.

Only the single sound of page flipping could be heard.

Even the store broadcast in the store wasn't noticeable. Still, the lyrics of this song were incomprehensible. What the heck did "you are donuts" mean? More like "you are donuttery". But listening to it normally, it was a good song.

Finally my warm café au lait came and as I sipped it, I flipped another page. Suddenly, Haruno-san spoke up.

"Hikigaya-kun."

"Yes?"

We continued to read as we exchanged words.

"Talk about something interesting pleaseee."

"…"

I unintentionally went silent in the worst way possible. I was pretty sure my expression was telling her how unpleasant I was feeling. What's with this person…? I thought that and when I looked at Haruno-san, she had a huge smile plastered on her entire face.

"That super disgusted reaction… Gosh, exactly what I thought you'd do!"

After she said that, Haruno-san exploded into laughter. You didn't have to say it if you knew that much…

Just when I thought she was acting docile, she started acting super cheeky again.

Simple and innocent, free without constraint, or possibly even overbearing.

As expected, I couldn't think of any words that could capture her. I just can't handle her.

Haruno-san looked like she found a perfect spot to stop reading and closed her book. She made a big stretch while groaning. Taking that kind of pose, um, really made me a little curious… The part that her little sister greatly lacked, that is.

"Is Yukino-chan doing well?"

Haruno-san reached for her coffee cup. As she rubbed the rim of her cup, she asked a question.

"…Well, nothing too different from the usual, I suppose."

“I see. That’s good.”

Despite being the one who one asked, she didn’t seem too interested as she said that while placing her books in her bag. She put her elbows on the now open tabletop and after crossing her fingers, she placed her chin on top. Which commander were you trying to pose as here, commander2?

Haruno-san faced my way and cleared her throat intentionally.

“So… Did anything happen afterwards?”

“Ha…”

“Any progress?”

Not mentioning a subject made it hard to understand what she was saying. As I replied with vague responses saying “what are you saying?”, Haruno-san sent me a dubious look.

“You went on a field trip, right?”

“You’re well-informed.”

Well, she was a graduate from our school so she probably had a rough idea of when the field trip was held. But still, she sure was on point.

When I replied with a surprised tone, Haruno-san began speaking as if she was unveiling the secret behind a magic trick.

“We received some souvenirs from her at home.”

The souvenir must have been from Yukinoshita. Judging from what she said, it looked like she didn’t hand it over directly.

“She went through the trouble of home delivery…”

Is she dumb? She didn’t even buy anything particularly amazing and not to mention it was only a few stations away…

Haruno-san gripped her cup with both her hands and sighed with a look of boredom.

“I imagine she didn’t want to face us.”

“But she still bought those souvenirs… How honest of her…”

I was both struck with admiration and shock that those few words slipped out of my mouth. Because it was very typical of Yukinoshita to do those things, I was convinced. But, Haruno-san turned her head sideways in doubt of my words.

“Ahh, I don’t think that’s it.”

The way she had denied it so oddly caught my interest and I took a look at Haruno-san with a side glance. Yukinoshita was really fussy with manners and was definitely a part of the group of people with integrity; at least, I acknowledged that myself. Was I mistaken somewhere?

Haruno-san tilted her cup and looked at the black waves of her coffee in motion.

“She hates us, but she doesn’t want us to hate her back…”

She spoke softly with a kind, pitiful, and light tone. This quiet tone was directed at herself and at someone who wasn’t here.

I had the feeling that she wouldn’t forgive me if I asked about what she was looking at, so I stayed quiet.

When I did, noticing the silence, Haruno-san put her cup down and turned towards me with exaggerated movements.

“Anyway, with the field trip over, there shouldn’t be any more big events coming up. After that, it’s just studying for exams. Won’t you be bored?

I plunged into the conversation.

“Not really. There’s still the student council election too.”

“Election? Huh? Shouldn’t that be over already?”

Haruno-san had a look of puzzlement and groaned as she tilted her head. That’s a graduate for you. She seemed to be checking with her memories.

“They had it postponed since they had trouble getting candidates.”

“Ooh. So I guess Meguri’s finally retiring, huh?”

She sounded a little emotional somewhere. To me, Meguri-senpai was a reliable upperclassman, wait no, maybe not. Nope. In fact, she was the one who relied on me which made her cute in her own way as an upperclassman. In the same way, she was a cute junior to Haruno-san. What did you know? She was super adorable either way. Megurin, you’re so adorable. Megurin!

Haruno-san laughed as if she remembered something about my cute upperclassman Meguri-senpai.

“Since we’re talking about Meguri, I bet she asked Yukino-chan to try for the student council president position, right?”

“Ahh, actually, as matter of fact, she didn’t.”

“Oh my, how boring.”

Haruno-san flapped her legs in disappointment.

“…So Yukino-chan isn’t going to run for presidency.”

“I guess so.”

As of now, Yukinoshita’s plan was supposed to be about providing support for a running candidate. I didn’t have the slightest clue as to who’d be running, but I could already see how much trouble it was going to be. If you take into account the time and labor needed, the plan wasn’t very efficient, cost-wise.

As I thought about how exactly she was going to go about doing it, the person next to me was deep in thought as well evident by her audible breathing.

"Hmm…"

It wasn't a particularly meaningful sigh, but for some reason, it really caught my attention. It wasn't because it was sexy or lovely. Rather, that slight smile she wore on her expression as she stared outside the window was ominous.

"…Um, so what about it?"

I asked her a question after a short pause and Haruno-san showed me another one of her usual, charming smiles.

"Hmm? Oh, you know, it's just I never did it myself."

"Huh, is that so? That's pretty surprising actually."

I was completely under the impression she took up any public positions that came her way. I mean, she did serve as the culture festival's chairman after all.

But, Haruno-san spat out her words nonchalantly.

"Really? I mean, it's too plain given how much of a pain it is. The job I mean."

"Aah, so that's the reason."

You convinced me.

More or less, working in the student council was a very plain job. If there was a big event, then as a student council member, you were able to take the lead and prepare as you see fit; the culture festival for example.

But other than that, there were a lot more plain jobs such as working behind the scenes like the election management council. They were nothing more than office jobs.

Besides, most of their time was probably spent sitting in the student council room lazing about while eating snacks. Should a problem come up, then they'd have to spring to action immediately. On top of that, as a member of the student council, you had to act as a model for all of the students in the school. Well, it was similar to being a civil servant. It was basically Servant x Service.

It wasn't as if Haruno-san was into doing flashy things and I could see her as a hedonistic individual. That's to say, she liked fun things and exciting things. Rather than diligently serve as a member of the student council, the image of her working as a manager for events that would happen around the corner like the culture festival suited her more.

Still, that brightness of hers was still something I couldn't take seriously.

"…So boooring."

After she spoke with a piercingly, cold tone, she giggled. Was there something at the depths of those words?

As I worried about whether I should ask her or not, a voice called out to me in a different direction.

“Huh? Hikigaya?”

It was a voice that came out of left field, scratching at the exterior of my brain.

When I turned in the direction of the voice, there were two high school girls.

One girl had a perm with a short bob hairstyle. The other person had a face with slanted eyes looking surprised. She was probably the one who called out to me.

She was dressed in the uniform of Kaihin Sogo High which was relatively near to my house. The bag she was holding, however, was from a private high school in the city. She was someone whom I wasn’t familiar with.

Despite that, I came to realize who she was.

“…Orimoto.”

The name left my lips instantly.

I thought I had pushed the existence of all my middle school peers to the bottom depths of my memories.

Despite that, the name Orimoto Kaori came out so easily.

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This unexpected meeting caused my body to stiffen up.

We gave each other confirming looks to see who the other was.

The period two to three years back flashed by in my head. The sweat glands on my scalp gradually began to open. I could feel the drops of sweat trickling down my back as well.

The person next to Orimoto looked like her friend who was accompanying her. She was wearing the same Kaihin Sogo High uniform and was taking unassuming looks in my direction.

The friend looked a little bored, but Orimoto didn’t seem to mind as she lightly tapped my shoulders and raised her voice.

“Talk about super nostalgic! Aren’t you, like, a rare character or something?”

As they rudely stared at me, the only thing I could do was make a strained smile.

True enough. If you thought about the tendencies during middle school, the chances of meeting me were quite low. In the first place, recognition was a one way relationship. I would notice them, but they wouldn’t notice me.

But, as far as rare incidents were concerned, for Orimoto to recognize who I was and call out to me was definitely one of them. This wasn’t any different from how it was back in middle school.

Orimoto was what you'd call a self-proclaimed big sister figure and she was the type to mind the business of others. She was the type of person who talked to anyone regardless who they were and tried to get as close as possible to them.

Orimoto had a look of curiosity for a moment before stopping in her tracks.

"Eh, Hikigaya, you go to Sobu High?"

"Ah, yeah."

After I answered, I twisted my body slightly and also looked at my uniform. Of all the prominent public college prep schools in the area, the only one with a blazer was mine. You'd understand where the student was from with just one glance in this area.

Orimoto seemed to be thinking the same thing as she breathed out mixed with admiration.

"Ooh. Now, that's super surprising. You were smart after all! Ah, but I've never ever seen what you got on your tests anyway. I mean, Hikigaya, you don't talk to anyone at all after all."

As usual, Orimoto was able to bluntly spit things out. She goes through the trouble of putting herself out there just so there wasn't an invisible wall erected between you and her.

A refreshing type. She was probably aiming for that.

And then, the rest of her interest was directed towards the person sitting next to me, Haruno-san, as if it was natural.

"Your girlfriend?"

As she asked with a curious tone, she compared me with Haruno-san. I felt something uncomfortable from Orimoto's gaze and replied back unintentionally in a small voice.

"No…"

"That's what I thought~! I was like no way too!"

As Orimoto cackled, her accompanying friend also covered her lips as she was trying to hold back her laughter.

Back then, I interpreted that as a carefree laugh. That attitude of hers that she used to indiscriminately talk with someone was a way to show her kindness. That's what I thought.

"Hahaha…"

Why was I forcing myself to laugh with them? How revolting.

It felt like the events from two to three years ago were going to suddenly rush back into my head. I let out a dry laugh as if to try to get rid of those memories.

Haruno-san, who was observing our exchange on the side, peered at my face suddenly.

“Could they be your friends, Hikigaya-kun?”

The nuance of the way she asked me kind of felt like she was asking “…you had friends?” Maybe it was just me, okay, maybe it wasn’t, I see.

But, well, although I was asked if Orimoto was my friend, I couldn’t really object with “no she isn’t, not at all”.

However, in a situation like this, I knew what the best answer was.

“She’s a classmate in middle school.”

Yep, yep, this was the correct answer. After all, the guys whom I thought I was friends with would introduce me to others like this.

After I answered, Orimoto turned towards Haruno-san and bowed her head slightly.

“I’m Orimoto Kaori.”

After her introduction, Haruno-san once again had that usual probing stare of hers.

“Hmmm… Ah, I’m Yukinoshita Haruno. I’m Hikigaya-kun’s… Hikigaya-kun’s… hey, what am I to you?”

“Er, how should I know?”

Actually, why were you trying to snuggle up close to me? Please stop looking at me from below like that.

“It’d be kind of odd to be calling us friends. Hmm, maybe an older sister perhaps? Oh, or maybe older sister-in-law…”

As Haruno-san tapped her chin while thinking, she peeked at me. When I sent her an apathetic look, she grinned.

“Ah, how about a meddlesome girlfriend then?”

Oh dear, what’s with that lovely confession?

Was she an idiot? How exactly did going from a friend to an older sister result in that? Huuuuh? But wait, if you replaced the older sister with a younger sister, oh how mysterious! Then again, like that’d be possible.

The way she was acting was so incredibly obvious that it could cause misunderstandings instead. But that made it easier for me to remain calm and answer easily.

“Couldn’t you just go with an upperclassman from school?”

“Aw, you’re no fun.”

After she said that, Haruno-san made a pouty, sulky face. I was thinking how I'd like to poke those cheeks of hers, but there was no way I could do that and I shrugged my shoulders instead.

Haruno-san was probably doing everything on purpose, but I was really glad she was here. Thanks to that, I didn't have to think too deeply about things. This may have been the first time I've ever been thankful to her.

If I were alone when Orimoto coincidentally called out to me, I'd have fallen in the dumps pretty hard. I probably would have ended up talking to the wall for five hours after I got home too.

Orimoto Kaori was a person from my middle school period that had to be avoided.

I thought I had to get away from Orimoto and company before dirt from my past was dug up, but that proved to be futile as Orimoto started talking to Haruno-san in that moment.

"Your seniority relationship sure is nice, huh!"

"I know, right? Well, that isn't all there is to it though!"

"Eeeh? I wonder what that could be!?"

The two continued their pointless conversation with Orimoto's friend occasionally chipping in with her nods…

I sat there in silence watching them exchange numerous amounts of words with each other.

Their social conversation continued to head in different directions with no end in sight.

In that period, the only permissible actions for me were to breathe and sip at my café au lait.

This time that felt like treading across a minefield continued on.

Suddenly, the conversation stopped.

For their first meeting, they sure had a lot to talk about. But now they had the opportunity to end it there and call it a day. Or that should have been the case.

But, Haruno-san crossed her arms in a dignified manner. She formed a thin smile and spoke.

"But still, going to the same middle school as Hikigaya-kun, huh? Any interesting stories?"

Those words acted as a trigger to continue the conversation. As Orimoto stretched out her "eeeh", she started to look into her memories.

I had a horrible premonition. Actually, you could say that I knew something horrible was about to come up.

“C’moon, I’m sure there was something? Ah, like love stories! Big sis sorta wants to hear about Hikigaya-kun’s love stories!”

Looking amused, Haruno-san tried to stir up the mood.

I could feel my back getting sweaty again and I was close to bursting out in laughter because of my feelings returning back from the time I was in middle school. Actually, it was more like they were burned into my very being. Jeez, how troublesome. Humans only tend to remember the bad things.

If I had the ability to communicate better, I’m sure I would have told her myself. I’d talk about them while painfully laughing at myself.

But because I wasted time thinking about that and because I hesitated, I didn’t make it in time.

Orimoto brushed her hair and laughed embarrassingly.

“Aah, that reminds me. Hikigaya confessed to me once!”

She let out a truth so easily.

“No waaay!”

“That makes me super curious!”

It wasn’t just Haruno-san, but also Orimoto’s friend who joined in on the conversation, chatting away enjoyably.

It was a topic that could easily energize the mood and Orimoto who brought it up continued excitedly.

“We never even talked to each other before, so it freaked me out sooo bad.”

Orimoto uttered those words.

But, we did talk. We definitely did.

Orimoto probably didn’t remember it. More accurately speaking, Orimoto probably didn’t recognize me as someone she had talked to.

That wasn’t the end of it. I also texted her too.

Whether it was out of pity or compassion, I managed to get her mailing address. I’d rack my brain over trying to figure out what to mail her. Ultimately, I’d end up sending a text for the most worthless reasons. There was a time when I waited excitedly and worriedly for a response, only for a magazine text to come instead causing me to cancel my subscription out of rage.

There was no doubt someone like Orimoto would have known that had happened. Even if she tried to remember, it wasn’t there in the first place.

Back then, people who were in love with someone else definitely had no interest in people who were not in their social circle. Instead, their actions become the butt of their jokes. They even didn’t serve to be as lasting memories either.

Those words brought back a surge of memories which caused my emotions to go wild.

The incident long ago that I thought I had laughed away had accurately stabbed at where I was hurt.

As I sat there frozen in place, I slowly let out a deep, deep sigh from the forced smile I had on my face.

“You don’t say, Hikigaya-kun confessed huh~.”

Haruno-san spoke with a surprised tone. But those amused eyes of her were dyed with a sadistic color. It made me suspect she wanted to know what happened between me and Orimoto after seeing my reaction to her.

As I looked at the corner of the floor, I managed to squeeze out a few words.”

“Well, it’s just something from a long time ago…”

“That’s true! It’s a long time ago so it doesn’t really matter, right!”

Orimoto and I probably had a different nuance when we used the same words.

Because it’s something from long time ago, because it’s already dealt with, and because it’s already over. That’s why Orimoto could say whatever she wanted and laugh so innocently.

There probably wasn’t any malice mixed in. She just wanted to have fun talking. Even her friend and Haruno-san were the same. It was like they were laughing at something pleasant.

It was exactly like that one time.

Even though I confessed to her when it was just the two of us, somehow, the entire incident had spread like wildfire in class the next morning. I could then hear snickers and sneers from a distance away. It was the same.

There wasn’t anything wrong with just being rejected after confessing.

In time, it’d just become a laughable story. As a moment of my younger years, I could easily come to terms with it.

What was difficult was when I noticed myself for being disappointed in the girl that I thought I liked. I, who, didn’t even understand that much or even notice that much was just as guilty too. My ignorant immature self was something I couldn’t laugh away.

The conversations were still ongoing, but they didn’t reach my ears.

I was probably spacing out, thinking about the past.

“Ah, right, Hikigaya.”

“Hm?”

When my name was called, I came back to my senses.

Orimoto looked like she forgot about the previous topic and instead started with a completely different one.

"Like, since you're going to Sobu High, doesn't that mean you know about Hayama-kun?"

"Hayama…"

I reflexively regurgitated that name and Orimoto suddenly leaned forward.

"Yep, Hayama! He's in the soccer club!"

That was enough information for me to determine that it was the same Hayama Hayato she was talking about.

"Aah, I guess so."

"For real!? There's like a bunch of girls who want to meet him, you know~ Like this one here!"

Orimoto reacted as if she caught something. She then pointed to her friend next to her.

"Ah, this girl's Nakamachi Chika from my school."

Nakamachi or whatever her name sat next to Orimoto and nodded lightly with a fuzzy smile. Orimoto poked at Nakamachi's with her elbows.

"C'mon, Chika, you might get introduced to Hayama!"

"Eeeh. You don't need to."

Although Nakamachi had said that, she looked just a little bit brighter and was clearly expecting something.

But, unfortunately for you, I'm not close with Hayama. We don't even know each other's numbers.

"Wait a second. I don't really know the guy…"

When I said that, Orimoto looked more convinced than disappointed.

"Aah, that's right. Doesn't seem like you guys would fit anyway."

"Hahaha…"

I made another dry laugh. There was definitely something stuck in my throat from a while ago.

As I cleared my throat a few times, I could hear a whisper from Haruno-san who had blended into the background.

"…Hmmm, this might be interesting."

"Huh?"

When I turned to her, Haruno-san's eyes lit up with a suspicious glow. And then, she suddenly raised her hand.

“Okaaaaay, onee-chan will introduce you to him!”

“Huh?”

Both Orimoto and I were confused wondering what she was saying so suddenly but Haruno-san quickly took out her cellphone and began dialing.

She knocked on the table with her fist as she waited for the call to get through. It was probably about three rings. Upon hearing a voice from the other end of the call, Haruno-san spoke in quick manner.

“Ah, Hayato? Can you come now? Actually, just come now.”

Haruno-san said what she wanted to say and quickly hung up the phone.

“What exactly are you doing…?”

“Hmhmhm. ”

Haruno-san wore a big smile on her expression.

This person’s having way too much fun…

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As everyone waited for Hayama’s arrival, I stared out the window at the city absentmindedly.

It was well past sunset and the city was submerged in the night as its night face gradually began to show.

The sign of the karaoke store in the distance flashed with neon lights and if you looked up, you could see the monorails cutting through the darkness. You could catch the sights of numerous young people walking about on the streets.

Soon enough, the sounds of footsteps climbing up the stairs in the store could be heard.

“Oh, looks like he might be here.”

Haruno-san twisted her upper body and took a peek in the direction of the stairs. When she did, Hayama Hayato appeared and finally arrived.

It looked like he stopped by right after club activities. He was still in his school uniform with his enamel bag hanging from his shoulders. When Hayama noticed us, he loosened his bolo tie with a tired expression.

“Haruno-san. This is?”

Hayama looked at Haruno-san followed by Orimoto and Nakamachi. And then, his gaze shifted over to me to which he stopped.

“There was a girl who wanted to be introduced to you, Hayato.”

Haruno-san spread both of her hands and lightly pointed at Orimoto and her friend.

Not even in their wildest dreams did Orimoto and her friend thought the actual Hayama would make an appearance as they giggled to each other excitedly. They huddled together while whispering things to each other.

"…I see."

Hayama let out a very short, short sigh that could easily be overlooked.

But he quickly gave a perky smile afterwards.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Hayama Hayato."

He showed the usual Hayama Hayato expression as if a switch was flipped on. From there, he introduced himself naturally and began chatting with them. Orimoto and Nakamachi began speaking as well, looking much cuter than they were earlier.

Now that their interest had shifted to Hayama, I was finally able to breathe normally again. The warm atmosphere in the store made it somewhat comfortable.

Now then, since Hayama was finally here, I could leave it to the youngsters to have fun and just go home… It didn't look like I'd be able to watch the movie though. Then again, if I went to watch the movies right now, I got the feeling I'd fall asleep within seconds of sitting down.

I closed my unfinished book and placed it in my bag. As I waited for the perfect chance to say I'll be my on my way home, the four were livening it up.

"Ah, do you want to, like, go have some fun somewhere next time?"

"Ah, that sounds like a good idea!"

When Orimoto and Nakamachi said that, Hayama nodded with a smile.

He acknowledged them without explicitly saying yes or no. It was a skill only allowed by handsome guys. If an average guy were to do this, he'd either be told he was indecisive or be ignored completely.

"Yep yep, going out to have fun is a good thing. You all should go. It really is a good idea."

Haruno-san crossed her arms and spoke in a serious manner.

With someone to give the approval, Orimoto and her friend started getting excited as they began to discuss places that would be good to go.

But, I just realized. She did say "all", but I'm totally not getting invited here am I…?

Well, that's natural.

As far as they were concerned, I was nothing more than an offering to summon Hayama. In order to evolve a monster level 5 and above, you have to send a lower leveled monster to the graveyard after all. There's no two ways about it. Gotta protect the rules to have a fun duel, you know!

Seeing that I was already sent to the graveyard, the only thing I could do was watch over the course of events here.

The conversation had become quite pleasant for a moment. Although it hadn't been fifteen minutes yet, Hayama tactfully avoided going along with the two girls and skillfully managed to create the chance to leave.

"Well, it's about time for me to go…"

"Okay. See you again Hayama! We'll mail you okay!"

They waved their hands and Hayama responded by raising his. As they walked to leave, Orimoto and Nakamachi were talking to each other saying "oh my gosh", "he's so cool", "this is so bad". When they disappeared to the lower floor, their voices couldn't be heard anymore.

As I looked at them until they disappeared completely, Hayama who had a smile the entire time made a cold expression.

He then glared at Haruno-san.

"…Why would you do something like this?"

"It looked like it'd be fun."

Haruno-san smiled without a hint of shyness. This wasn't anywhere near the innocence of a harmless prank. What I could see was nothing, but ill will.

Hayama made a threatening sigh.

"That again… So, why is he here? It doesn't look like he has anything to do with it."

Hayama turned his head towards me as he said that and Haruno-san responded immediately.

"That's not true! That girl, ah, the one with the perm I mean. That girl was someone Hikigaya-kun liked a long time ago apparently! Isn't that really interesting? I wonder what kind of face Yukino-chan would make if she knew about this, hmmm… Right, Hikigaya-kun?"

And finally, she sent a smile my way. But the only one having a blast was just Haruno-san.

There was no way I'd be having fun. But for some reason, Hayama made another gloomy expression.

"…"

Unlike the cheerful Haruno-san, both Hayama and I were silent.

The conversation halted and Haruno-san let out a short, bored sigh. And looking to change the mood, she stood up and tapped Hayama on the shoulders.

"Well, anyway, why don't you go hang out with them? It might actually turn out to be pretty fun and go well for you."

After she spoke, Hayama's shoulders dropped. His gaze dropped to where his and Haruno-san's feet were. It was exactly in between the two of them.

"There's no way…"

"Oh? You never know?"

Hayama responded weakly and Haruno-san took his words lightly. When she pulled back her sleeves, a pink and silver wrist watch flashed.

"Yep, I managed to kill some time in a nice way. Okay, I'll be going now."

Haruno-san quickly gathered up her belongings as she said in a speedy manner.

"Hikigaya-kun, thanks for hanging out with me."

She shuffled over to me and whispered in my ear secretly. A fresh, floral scent overpowered my nose while a soft breath hit my ears. Because of that, I retracted backwards suddenly. My ears are incredibly itchy darn it, so I'd like you to stop, please!

I took two to three steps back from Haruno-san to quickly make some distance from her and at that moment, Haruno-san quickly dashed for the stairs.

As she went her way, she turned her head and waved her hand.

"If there's any progress, let me know okay~!"

It totally sounded like she was talking to me, but there's no progress here, you know! I wasn't invited, after all! Or so I thought as I nodded to her as she left.

Now with the boisterous woman gone, what was left was just silence.

The only ones left were me and Hayama.

That said, there wasn't any reason for us to stay here.

This late in the game, there really wasn't anything to talk about.

In the past, Hayama Hayato and I had talked and then we had ended it then and there. Regardless of how similar our goals were, how similar our ideals were, we were fully aware of how hopeless our positions were.

From here on, it was likely we would never involve ourselves with each other anymore. Their behavior from this morning made it even more apparent. It was the choice of not only mine but also Hayama's.

I picked up my bag and started to walk.

"You…"

A voice that sounded like it'd disappear came from behind.

I had absolutely no reason to talk to him. But, I reflexively stopped my legs. All I did was stand there without looking back, waiting for his next words.

"…Haruno-san seems to be quite fond of you."

“Huh?”

Unthinkable words caused me to turn my head.

When Hayama’s eyes met with mine, he let out a smile. It felt like that smile had seen through something and as I spat out some words, I turned back towards the front.

“Don’t be an idiot. She was just messing around.”

“She looks interested at the very least though.”

Hayama’s voice made it past my back.

The tone of the voice quickly changed.

“If she doesn’t have any interest in something, she wouldn’t act so cheeky like that… She wouldn’t do anything. She’ll meddle so much with what she likes to the point of killing it. For the things she hates, she’d go the extra mile to crush them.”

Was that advice or a warning? Hayama’s words were definitely sharper than usual. I was really curious about what his expression was like at this moment, but even so, I didn’t turn around.

“…Oh, how scary.”

That was just my honest opinion and although I was already well aware of the truth, I stayed silent and left.

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I rode my bike endlessly down the highway and eventually made it back to the city that I lived in. The day wasn’t even over yet and I was already feeling incredibly nostalgic.

I approached my house and opened the front door. Coming to greet me was Kamakura which was unusual.

He purred with an unmotivated tone and rubbed his head and body against my leg. You’re going to get fur on my uniform, stop it.

“What is it? Something wrong?”

I thought I’d try asking, but instead of responding with his usual purrs, he hacked out a cough instead. What kind of cat greeting was that? Was it like those “meowning” greetings, non[3]?

“C’mon, get going.”

I called out to Kamakura and ascended the stairs.

The lights on the second floor were off.

Considering the time, my parents definitely weren’t going to be home. But, it looked like Komachi wasn’t home yet either. She’s probably at cram school then. Testing season was just about three months away.

It turned out that some fur managed to get on my uniform so I decided to change into my house clothes.

I threw my uniform in my room and headed for the living room. I didn't forget to bring along the take-out donuts with me downstairs. With this, I should be able to cheer myself up.

As I was about to go down, waiting for me was Kamakura who appealed to me again with his purrs.

"What, you still need something?"

With another purr, Kamakura headed for the back of the kitchen. There was a bowl with glued on wooden letters spelling out KAMAKURA. A quick glance made it look like it was a bowl made by KADOKAWA, but it was actually just a plate for Kamakura's use prepared by Komachi.

In the bowl were leftover crumbs and powder from previous meals.

"…Nothing to eat, huh?"

Oh I see how it is. You didn't actually come to greet me at the door. You were just telling me "there's no food, damn it". Not very cute, are you?

I opened the bin in the back of the kitchen and took out the oh-so-familiar crunchy cat food often paired with a silver spoon, and dumped it in the bowl. But still, if you were to mix this with milk, it'd look like chocolate, wouldn't it?

Kamakura thrust his head into the bowl the moment I poured the food in. Halfway through, I couldn't tell if the food was hitting against Kamakura's head or going in the bowl.

"You better chew your food slowly."

I stroked Kamakura's head while wiping off the powder stuck to his fur before getting up. I staggered my way to the sofa and collapsed onto it.

When I did, I let out a deep sigh.

I continued to make deeper sighs, taking deep breaths.

As I lied there motionlessly, Kamakura rubbed at my feet and came closer.

I thought he had come to report that he was done with his food, but instead he climbed onto my legs. With a satisfied sigh, he began to purr.

"…What do you know? You're surprisingly tactful, aren't you?"

I was pretty sure he was just using me as a replacement for a hot water bottle because he was cold, but, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt this time.

I grabbed a comb and brushed Kamakura's back. While doing that, my eyelids started to grow heavy.

What a long day.

Chapter 4

Silently, **Yukinoshita Yukino** makes her decision.

The piercing cold woke me up.

"…So cold."

As I squirmed restlessly sitting up, a blanket slowly slid off of me.

Apparently I fell asleep on the sofa last night. I vaguely recalled my mom telling me something. It was something along the lines of "you'll get a cold if you sleep on the sofa".

But with that being pointless, she just left me there and let me sleep. My memories were a little hazy and I might have said something back, but I probably just fell straight back to sleep in the end. My sleeping companion, Kamakura, was nowhere in sight. He likely went to sleep in a warmer place.

As I cracked my neck, shoulders, and waist, I stood up. On the table was prepared breakfast.

I took a look around the room while eating and my parents seemed to have already left the house. Komachi seemed to have left for school as well and the only one remaining in the house was me.

On top of the table were the donuts I brought home yesterday and there were less of them than before. Someone must have eaten them.

While changing, I could feel the chilly weather that got colder day by day.

Did I really get a cold…? Or was it because I slept in a weird position that I didn't get enough sleep?

I had a slight headache too. I think there was some headache pain relievers somewhere… I rummaged through the cabinet and took in the first bottle I saw.

Mmmm yeaaaaaaaaah! Medishine's shooooo guuuuuuud!![1]

Hmph, this was definitely the line to say after a serving of medicine.

I left the house and headed for school on my bike while repeatedly chanting "it's cold, it's cold, it's cold".

Yesterday was the day right after the field trip so there was this odd feeling of restlessness somewhere. But once that made it to the regular classes, it'd go away somewhere eventually.

The school gate, the bike parking area, and the front entrance were all things I've gotten used to over the two years I've been here. But I didn't feel any attachment to it at all so it was a mysterious feeling.

When I entered through the front entrance, I bumped into Yuigahama.

“Ah… M-Morning.”

“Yeah.”

I quickly greeted her and headed for the classroom. From behind were footsteps that sounded more restrained than usual.

I could hear sighs coming from the back as if there were words lodged in her throat. I continued walking down the hallway, trying my best to not be too bothered by it.

There were less and less people as I approached the stairs. Noticing this, Yuigahama hopped up the stairs and ascended alongside me.

“S-So, about today… Are you… going to the club?”

She asked with a very awkward, but probing tone. But I already knew what I was going to say.

“No. I’m not going.”

After I said that, Yuigahama tried to laugh it off as if she already knew what I was going to say.

“R-Right… U-Um, the thing is, we’re going to talk a little bit more with Iroha later so we can get a better idea of what to do or something.”

Judging from her tone, Yuigahama was probably working together with Yukinoshita. It was probably after I was on my way home that they talked to each other.

While Yuigahama continued speaking, we had only climbed a few steps up the stairs.

“So, I just kinda thought Hikki not knowing was kinda that, you know…”

There were a lot of meanings in the word “that”. It was a pronoun that made you curious just exactly where the truth was and made you want to dig into it. When I glanced at Yuigahama, her facing down expression made me realize she still had more things to say.

The stairs that I was used to ascending felt longer than usual.

“Aren’t you…”

Words suddenly escaped my lips.

“Eh?”

“…Er, it’s nothing.”

“Aren’t you angry?” were the words I kept myself from saying. How unsightly. How incredibly lame.

What’s the point in trying to act dumb?

Yuigihama wanted to spend the days just like always; the same way as before.

That should've been in line with what I wanted to do as well.

You keep things to yourself and make a composed face as if nothing was there. You continue to do this every day. But eventually, you'll forget about them. And when the time comes when you can't take it back, you'll look back on these memories nostalgically wondering if that was how it really went with hints of regret. You'll end up telling yourself that they were nothing more than just bittersweet memories.

"…Well, that's fine if it's just to hear her out."

I said those words when we finally finished climbing the stairs. I quickly turned to the hallway and never got to hear a response.

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When class ended, my classmates left in doves of twos and threes. Of course, there were also people who stayed in the classrooms having fun talking with each other. People who stayed to chat until clubs started up were also in the class.

I quickly got ready to head home and I steadied my breathing at my seat. I would go directly home from here or so I'd like to.

As long as the service club stayed voluntary, there was no obligation forcing me to go. But my brief exchange with Yuigahama in the morning when I bumped into her shortly after arriving at school, I needed to go to the service club room so I could hear out what the deal was with Isshiki.

To be honest, my plans could be executed regardless of what Isshiki's thoughts and circumstances were. That's why it wasn't necessary at all for me to listen to what they had to say.

That being said, there could possibly be things that could come up that would affect what Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had in mind regarding their plans.

So basically, it boiled down to listening to what Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had to say instead.

With that in mind, exactly how far could I go in facing Yukinoshita head on? This was exactly similar to when we first met each other and how we argued over the validity of our methods at every opportunity. Or actually, I got the feeling it was mostly her criticizing what I did half the time.

Right. If I thought about it like that, then this time was exactly the same as back then. Yukinoshita rejected the way I did things this time as well. With that being so, this formality between us would continue as usual without the slightest change and our situation would stay maintained.

If nothing changed, then there wouldn't be any problems.

After coming to a conclusion, I stood up from my seat.

When I made slight glances around the room, people who were absorbed in their conversations were all gone. Even Yuigahama was nowhere to be seen and seemed to have left the room already.

I went into the hall and headed for the special building.

Although it was going to be after school very soon, it was eerily quiet since it was about this time when the cultural clubs would start their activities.

Thinking on it, last year during this season, I never did walk down this hall. How this chilly air propagated throughout the hallway during the late autumn was something I came to know at this very moment.

When I arrived in front of the room, I opened the door without hesitation.

"Ah, he really came…"

The owner of those words was Yuigahama. She looked at me in relief.

There were two others in the room.

Yukinoshita glanced at me very slightly, but she seemed to have been occupied with writing something before I entered. She quickly went back to focusing on the paper in her hand.

The other person was Isshiki Iroha who was sitting in the direction of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. She twisted her body around and looked at me. After making a curious expression which flat out said "who the heck was this guy again? I better smile though", she smiled and slightly nodded her head.

Well, to Isshiki, I was probably a worthless existence to her so it was understandable. Particularly in her case where her usual partners were people like Hayama, she was no doubt part of the top caste of the social hierarchy.

Even then, it wasn't like she was openly ignoring me, but she was definitely giving off this well-off aura. Frankly, if it was me from a long time ago, this was definitely the bare minimum for me to fall for her. On the contrary, it was this slight cunningness that girls typically hated that caused this time's incident to happen.

I nodded slightly to Isshiki and went to my usual seat. When I did, Yukinoshita began.

"Well, shall we begin?"

So they haven't talked about anything yet, huh? I shot a quick glance at the clock and a good amount of time had already passed since the chiming of the last bell that signified the end of school. It looked like Yuigahama took notice of what I said this morning about "just to hear her out" and waited for me.

"…Sorry for making you wait."

"…That's fine."

When I said that, Yukinoshita responded with closed eyes, not looking at all in my direction. No more words came out of her after that.

A silence akin to halting gears filled the room to which Yuigahama laughed uncomfortably. She turned towards Isshiki.

"Um, sorry for making you come here. Were you busy with your club by chance?"

"Nooope, not at all! Besides, I let Hayama know that I had something important to do and he gave me the okay too."

Isshiki answered energetically and leaning forward, she continued.

"Speaking of which, Yui, you're in the same class as Hayama, aren't you? Could it be you've already talked about me?"

"Eh…? No, not in particular."

Yuigahama tilted her head with a half open mouth. She tried recalling something from her memories, but it looked like nothing relevant came up. Isshiki who asked the question began brooding.

"…I see. He didn't hesitate to send me on my way so I for sure thought you might have heard something from him."

Haa, I see. From the tone of her voice, I can assume that Isshiki was in love with Hayama.

So, it was basically along these lines: "The reason why he sent me away so easily from the club today was because he knew about my circumstances and not because he didn't need me, right?" Hey, that kind of feeling was something I was kind of familiar with so it's kind of hard to comment.

I better stop reading too deeply into what a person says and does, yeah! Knowing the truth just hurts after all.

If I was able to notice what Isshiki was thinking, there's no way Yuigahama would.

She quickly made a "crap!" expression and followed up right after.

"Ah, but since it's Hayato we're talking about, if he knew about it, wouldn't he be a lot more assuming of what's going on, maybe! That's why you don't need to worry about it too much… okay?"

"Y-You're right!"

Yukinoshita watched their exchange in disinterest. When she noticed the pause in the conversation, she called out to Yuigahama.

"Yuigahama, let's get started."

"Okay, good idea. So, we're going to decide what our objective is so we're gonna ask you about a few things, okay?"

Yuigahama got into the main topic and Isshiki responded with an idiotic sounding yes.

"For now, Iroha, we'll find another candidate to step in and you'll face off with that person in the election. And then you'll lose as simply as possible in the final vote. We think this is the best way. Is that okay with you?"

"Let's see, that really does give you a 'final vote' feeling. Ah. But, if possible, I'd like to lose someone who's amazing. It'd be better for me personally!"

She looked like she wasn't thinking at all, but Isshiki replied vigorously anyway.

Although Yuigahama was the one explaining it, the actual brains behind the ideas were probably Yukinoshita who filled her in yesterday. They talked with each other to get a solid grasp of what their objective was. Today's goal was to check Isshiki's thoughts on it. From there, they would proceed to the next part of the plan.

That was fine. But, there was still a part that was problematic.

"Did you find someone willing to be a candidate?"

"Not yet actually…"

Yuigahama choked on her words and averted her face. Well, there's no way it'd happen in the time span between yesterday and today. What was important was when they could find the candidate.

"What's the cutoff for when you can run as a new candidate in the election?"

"The Monday two weeks from now. That said, the deadline's supposed to have already passed, but that Monday is tentatively the new cutoff day. It's the only day when they'll accept any more candidates. The voting will take place on the Thursday of that week."

My question was directed at Yuigahama, but the one who answered abruptly was Yukinoshita. Her eyes were focused on the paper at her hands and the minimal information that left her mouth had no feeling of emotions at all.

I lightly crossed my arms and began calculating the remaining time between today's date and the cutoff date.

Today was Tuesday. It was also after school already. If they were really going to go with the other candidate plan, then it was best to think that they'd start tomorrow. If you consider that you can't do much on a Saturday, then there wasn't much wiggle room.

If you also factor in the time needed to collect the written application to become a candidate as well as the list of names endorsing the candidate, then the time was even more limited. On top of that, they also needed to support the candidate as well as the personnel involved in the campaign.

“Until then, you need to find a candidate, persuade him or her, and find over 30 people to endorse her. After that, there’s also the election campaign as well huh…”

“We’re very aware of how little time we have left.”

Yukinoshita snapped back at my words I accidently let out with a cold tone. And then, she finally raised her head and spoke to Isshiki.

“That’s why we plan on going on ahead regarding those things… Isshiki.”

“Y-Yes.”

Isshiki gave a flustered reply. Yukinoshita may have been one of those punctual types that Isshiki wasn’t good at dealing with. She quickly fixed her posture and sat straight. But her hands that were slightly gripping onto the baggy cuffs of her uniform stayed the same. She used those very hands to fix the hems of her short skirt. There wasn’t any signs of nervousness at all in her gestures.

Isshiki looked at Yukinoshita in a formal manner and looked ready to listen. Yukinoshita who met her eyes head on began to speak.

“Regardless of how it’s done, a speech needs to be made for Isshiki.”

“Haa, well, that isn’t too much of a problem…”

Well, she looked like she was used to being seen by people anyway.

But her voice sounded like she didn’t get it at all so that made me worry. It’d be a problematic for me if she acted like that. It’d be like Yukinoshita said and it’d boil down to the plan I had in mind which was to make the speech myself.

“In the speech, the promises of the campaign need to be laid out so you can talk about them. Although, I don’t think there’d be anyone who would listen to it seriously…”

Somewhere in those words were feelings of self-mockery. It sounded like there were more to those words, but instead of brooding about it, Yukinoshita continued on.

“It might be better for the other candidate to have different campaign platform when Isshiki is doing her speech. If it’s the same thing, it’d just become a popularity contest. We want to aim for a somewhat noticeable difference in the two platforms.”

If all they needed to do was support some candidate, then that would be ideal. But, if it became a popularity vote, then it’d be a fierce battle dictating who was less popular than the other.

If they preach the same thing, then it’d boil down to a battle of who was more ostentatious. The center of attention would end up being on the speaker was than what the speaker was talking about.

Isshiki and Yuigahama nodded with an expression that ambiguously walked the line between understanding and not understanding the issue.

Not making a big deal out of their reaction, Yukinoshita held out a piece of paper.

"I thought up the details of the campaign platform and the speech so could you take a look at them? It'd help me out if you could think of other things that are slightly different using this as a reference."

Isshiki grabbed the piece of paper and looked at it on the side.

"…Um, is this all?"

Isshiki quickly skimmed it and said surprisingly. Indeed, the methodical writing style of Yukinoshita Yukino was different on the paper and not to mention the amount was little.

The campaign consisted of two promises.

They were the establishment of a university-minded study center and the loosening up of the standards of club activity fees.

The clause regarding the club fees was easy to understand as it was on the paper. After looking at the content regarding the university-minded study center, I got a good idea of what it was.

In order to help with one's academic studies, the school would set up a system where past term tests and problems would be stored in a database that could be offered and loaned out on request which would essentially teach you the know-hows behind what you were looking for. Of course, this wasn't just simply another reference room. The main point behind the idea was that it would encompass everything up to the term tests. For students aiming for a recommendation for a particular school, this would serve to boost their confidence if they manage to get good scores on these tests.

This took on the position that appealed to both those in clubs and the test-oriented students.

Isshiki carefully looked at the paper while expressing her surprise, but other than the two points listed by Yukinoshita on the paper, there was nothing else.

Yuigahama looked at Isshiki and massaged the balls of her hair.

"You know, I thought it wasn't all that much either too."

"Numbers aren't the issue at times like these. Having at least one would've been good enough too."

Yukinoshita smiled as she said to Yuigahama. Her expression looked much gentler and mature than usual.

I understood what Yukinoshita was trying to say. In reality, the speech was nothing more than to direct your questions at. Even if you said a lot of things, it's

doubtful anyone was really listening. What's important was getting the right points across to everyone.

But, oddly enough, because Yukinoshita seemed so used to this, I couldn't help, but think of the Yukinoshita household.

If I remember correctly, Yukinoshita's father was a member of the prefectural assembly or something. She may have had some familiarity with elections and speeches.

That's why what Yukinoshita came up for the campaign promises was fine.

What bothered me was what would happen later on.

"…You guys were the ones who thought up what the campaign should be about. This means that the candidate is pretty much a puppet candidate, but is that okay with you?"

"…"

Yukinoshita's smile she had been making up until now cracked. Apparently, I hit a sore spot as Yukinoshita went silent.

Yuigahama and Isshiki looked at me with eyes asking for an explanation.

"It's fine doing it your way if it turns out well. That is, if reality was that simple… But let's say the candidate does win the election, what is he going to do about managing the student council? Are you going to continue helping him after that? Maybe even forever?"

I had no intention of criticizing Yukinoshita, but every word was sharp. Yuigahama quickly interrupted.

"T-That's why we want to look for someone capable first."

"You're just making it harder. If you think about the future, then it doesn't really mean much. It's not a very good idea."

This wasn't just about this election in particular. This also involved the student council administration from here on out. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama's solution was still incomplete.

I couldn't figure out the meaning behind it.

Yukinoshita's gaze dropped to the surface of the table and I couldn't see anything from her expression. There were no signs of movement at all in her downward facing expression, her gorgeous intertwined fingers, or her slender shoulders.

Just after a short breath, I could hear a slightly feeble and quivering voice.

"…Then, what meaning is there behind your methods?"

When she asked me, I couldn't give an answer right away. Even though that was a question that seemed so obvious and even late, I had yet to think of an answer for it.

What meaning did my methods have?

Obviously, nothing at all.

There was never any meaning at all. All I did was just push things onto the backburner and kept it there until it all became for nothing. The way I did things fell under that kind of type after all. It didn't matter if someone pointed it out to me this late in the game, I was well aware of it.

But cases where those methods were the only ways to resolve the problem and where those methods were the most effective existed.

That was indeed the truth.

This case was all the same. If this was the same way, then what I was going to say was already set in stone.

"If it's just this time, then for now, I'd say avoid everything. After losing because of a vote of no confidence, then we can pull out and let the special election happen. That's the right answer."

"Just this time? No, that's wrong."

Yukinoshita's voice wasn't as feeble as before. It was a criticizing voice that was dyed with a stern chillness.

Yukinoshita who was looking downward the entire time looked up.

Her blue eyes were fired up. The light from her sharp eyes wouldn't allow me to look away. It was a glare that felt as if she was holding an ice prick to my neck. It took a hold of me and wouldn't let me go.

I swallowed nervously.

Yukinoshita bit her lips. It was like she was trying to swallow her words. But even so, she couldn't stop herself and the words came flowing out.

"…You did the same thing before and avoided the situation."

Her voice was so quiet. It was so quiet yet it reverberated so well in my ears.

It was shaking. The inside of my head was assaulted by a jolting sensation.

The vivid, blue moonlight illuminated the bamboo forest and the cold wind blew past the leaves and branches. What floated into my mind was that kind of scenery.

As I tried to shake those thoughts away, I unconsciously rustled my hair.

“So… was there a problem?”

The incident during the field trip wasn’t solved in the least.

Instead, the problem was pushed into the darkness. The result of avoidance wasn’t something to convince everyone. Rather, the whole point was aiming to not convince anyone at all.

That’s why there wasn’t a single person who could criticize my actions at the time.

Except for Yukinoshita Yukino.

Yukinoshita’s gaze maintained their intensity as she continued staring at me.

Her sealed lips trembled.

“Weren’t you the one who said there wasn’t any meaning in those kinds of superficial appearances…?”

Loneliness reverberated somewhere in that cold and soft voice of hers. I couldn’t help, but look away.

Those piercing words alone were words I couldn’t bring myself to answer.

That was probably the one and only shared belief between Hikigaya Hachiman and Yukinoshita Yukino.

As I sat there without saying anything, Yukinoshita sighed in resignation.

“You don’t plan on changing, do you?”

“…Yeah.”

I answered without hesitation.

I won’t change. I just can’t change.

“U-Um…”

Yuigahama spoke up trying to do something about the stiff atmosphere. But her eyes wandered around because she didn’t know what she wanted to say. Her eyes went back and forth between me and Yukinoshita.

The stiff, frozen time continued to tick by. Yukinoshita and I were both dead silent.

Isshiki gave Yuigahama a troubled look. Since Yukinoshita and I were not close to Isshiki, the only reliable person in this rigid space was Yuigahama.

Before Yuigahama could find her words, I stood up from my seat.

"…I'm going to head home now. I already got the gist of what's going on now."

There was no point in staying in the room any longer because there would be nothing to gain from doing so.

It was likely only things would be lost if I stayed.

My indoor shoes echoed throughout the quiet room. No one moved except for me.

The time it took to make it to the door didn't feel very long. It was probably because I wasn't thinking about anything. Or maybe it was because I was thinking too much that I lost my sense of time.

I closed the door behind me and walked down the hallway for a bit. In the soundless hallway, the slight sound of a sliding door could be heard.

I turned around reflexively and standing before me was Isshiki Iroha. I relaxed my shoulders. She looked more reassured than she was dejected. Right now, I didn't have any confidence I'd be able to talk to the girls properly.

Isshiki walked up to me and spoke to me in a small voice as if mindful of the club room behind her.

"Ummm, it'll be okay if I leave it up to you guys right…"

She asked me worriedly. Although she came for her request, instead of getting a solution to her problem, she was shown a squabble that you couldn't even call an argument that wasn't relevant at all. I could understand why she'd be worried.

"As long as someone somewhat capable comes up, then it'd be a lot easier for me you know…"

"In that case, Hayama's class comes to mind…"

"Hayama's no good!"

I thought so… Then again, I doubt he'd do it anyway…

"…Anyway, worse comes to worse, I'll do something. I mean, something will come up eventually on the day of the vote."

"Haa, it's just losing by itself would cause problems for me too…"

I said what I could, but Isshiki's vague response clearly showed she was feeling anxious. Even so, it looked like she was putting in the effort trying to hide her anxiety. She clapped her hands together and made a cute smile.

"But, well, you guys really helped me out. No one else would come out to help me after all. I only have you upperclassmen left to rely on!"

Both her gesture and her speech were good. If you didn't know any better, you'd suddenly get the urge to protect her. But if you were aware that this was all part of her character, then you wouldn't think anything of it.

Unlike the types like Orimoto Kaori, her actions were characterized by that of an outsider's or possibly the portion of her that was interested in guys.

Her fluffy self and her refreshing and cool self.

She would act based on those characteristics alone with her own personal feelings having no relevance whatsoever. If she didn't follow through with her character, then the only thing you'd see was an egotistic individual.

That's why her behavior stayed the same with me.

There was no meaning in doing anything more.

Proof of that, well not really proof, was seen when Isshiki goes "ah" as if she remembered something. She then clapped her hands together and quickly took her distance from me.

"I still have club to attend so I'll be excusing myself okaaay. Thanks for the help."

Isshiki raised her hand lightly and briskly walked away. The lack of interest in me was shown in her indifferent gesture.

If this was a long time ago, I definitely would have thought there was some sort of significance to a worthless conversation like this.

Geez, I only grew up in the most unlikable ways. I instinctively let out a self-mocking laugh.

Chapter 5

Even until the very end, **Hayama Hayato** still can't understand.

A few days passed since the day I talked with Yukinoshita and the others in the club room.

In that time, my life consisted of only going home and going to school back and forth. Even at home, I didn't even see Komachi and never really had a real conversation. My only speaking partner was just my cat, Kamakura.

I would probably go straight home after homeroom without visiting the club today as well.

The words of the homeroom teacher went in one ear out the other with those thoughts in mind. Homeroom ended shortly after.

I grabbed my bag and stood up. Yuigahama was still in the classroom since I could hear her mixed in with the other chatting voices. I fixed my head downwards such that it wasn't facing in her direction and I quickly walked.

When I arrived at the front of the door, someone suddenly tapped my shoulders.

"Got a second?"

When I turned around, the person before me was Hayama and his refreshing smile.

"…What?"

When I answered, Hayama looked around him before telling me to come over. Apparently, he wanted to have a secret chat.

But getting my face all close to Hayama was definitely something I didn't want to do. Actually, Ebina's still here you know… That's just kind of, a little… it's soo embarrassing…

Well, whatever. We never talk to each other normally so there shouldn't be anything to talk about let alone anything secretive.

Though if there was something, then it would be related to the field trip a while back. But that, too, was something that we both decided not to talk about anymore.

I kept my face where it was and instead, stared at him telling him to go on with his story.

When I did, Hayama made a troubled laugh, gave up, and shrugged his shoulders. He looked like he was going to start talking from there.

"It's about Orimoto-san and Nakamachi-san the other day."

"Yeah."

Oh yeah, it was because of Haruno-san that he fell into her trap of being introduced to those two. So that's how it was; I guess he was having trouble trying to woo them or something. But sad news for you, there's nothing I could do for you.

But that wasn't actually what Hayama had in mind when he brought it up.

"I wanted to talk to you about the time on Saturday."

"Uh huh."

Saturday, huh? Saturday. Speaking of Saturday, then it's gotta be that. That's the day before Super Hero Time, wasn't it? So he must have been talking about Jewelpet Sunshine and Pretty Rhythm. So you just wanted to check when those shows were being broadcasted, huh? It's in the morning man. You didn't need to go through the trouble of asking me to figure it out.

Or so I thought, but there was no way Hayama was asking about that.

Then, what did he mean by Saturday…

As I thought about it, Hayama looked at me dubiously.

"Wait, they didn't ask you? They sent me a text about wanting to hang out in Chiba on Saturday."

"No, they didn't ask me…"

Go out? That's a kid I didn't know, mister…

In the first place, I never got a mail though? Oh wait, I never did change my mailing address. The text I sent with my last address didn't go through after all.

Then not getting an invitation was obvious. Oh I see! It's because they didn't know my address that I didn't get an invite, huh! Oh, those shy girls!

Yeah, maybe in another lifetime.

Words weren't needed as I really wasn't invited.

But Hayama looked like he didn't understand and tilted his head.

"I see… I thought they meant all of us when they said they all wanted to go out."

If you consider that from Hayama's perspective, then that would be right. He was a guy who had the "everyone, let's get along!" motto.

"Well obviously, that's just a pretext. Whatever it is, a guy who goes despite not having been invited is out of his mind. You should just do as you like."

“Not having been invited, huh?”

Hayama nodded and with a smile, he continued on.

“Well, want to go with me? It’d better if the numbers match too.”

“Like hell I’m gonna to go…”

Was he an idiot? Not getting an invitation in the first place was what you would call an uninvited guest, Einstein. It was pretty obvious the moment they saw me there, their face would contort into a “why is he here?” face.

Also, there were other problems aside from their reactions.

“Besides, do you really think I’d go out with you?”

When I asked him, Hayama withdrew his smile and made a serious face. I was probably making the same face.

Given how different our world and social stature was, I couldn’t imagine at all the two of us choosing to meet each other willingly outside the school premises. No, it didn’t even have to be outside the school. This current situation was irregular in itself.

If you thought about it both objectively and subjectively, this pairing was completely out of left field.

I still hadn’t forgotten that show of pity from Hayama that one time.

The moment our positions were clearly segregated from the top and the bottom was the moment the distance between us was dictated. I wasn’t allowed to step over to the other side just like how I wouldn’t allow Hayama to step over it either.

It was the narrow-mindedness of both the world and me.

If you were watching from the side, you’d see a stare down between two people in silence.

The one who broke the silence was Hayama.

“Can you come along and think of of it as helping me out?”

To my surprise, Hayama had bowed his head. I couldn’t see Hayama’s downcast expression, but based on his tightly gripped fist, he wasn’t smiling.

To go as far as bowing his head, I couldn’t understand what was going through his head. Even so, I wasn’t in the mood to lend him an ear either.

“I won’t be of any help to you nor are you the kind of guy who needs it.”

After I said that, Hayama moved his shoulders slightly. However, he continued to bow his head.

“…Also, that’s a weekend so I don’t want to leave the house. Ah, how about that? You should bring along a friend and introduce him instead. That way, everything would work out perfectly.”

After I spat those final words, I left the area.

“I see…”

Just before I closed the door behind me, small murmurs could be heard.

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I got home and lazed about until midnight. The TV was left on, books were scattered about, and I was playing a mobile game on my phone. This Wonder Trade system was one godly system kind to loners.

My parents came home late and although they gave me a few scolding words, I only replied with vague answers like “uh huh” and “sure” to which they abandoned me and left me to my own devices.

Normally, I would jump straight to bed or focus on reading a book, but recently, no matter what I did, there wasn’t anything that would keep my attention.

But still, now that it was in the middle of the night, I was finally starting to get sleepy.

As I yawned on the sofa and did a big stretch, the living room door opened.

Just when I thought it was the cat that opened the door on his own, standing there was actually Komachi in her night cap and pajamas with a disgruntled look.

As I worried about what to talk about, Komachi spoke up first.

“Onii-chan, phone.”

“Huh?”

When she gave me those surprising words, I grabbed my cellphone and looked at it. No incoming call, no texts, running low on battery. Hey, I really hate this phone.

So, what did she mean by phone? I turned to look at Komachi and a cellphone flew at me. I just barely caught it from hitting my face head on. When I looked at the phone, it was Komachi’s.

“I’m going to sleep now. When you’re done, just leave it there.”

“Ah, right.”

She said it quickly and withdrew to her room.

I looked at Komachi’s cellphone that was left in my care. On the screen reflected the “on hold” message.

Let’s pick it up for now. I didn’t know who it was on the other end, but as long as Komachi had passed this person along to me, then the person had to be someone decent.

I took the call and put the phone to my ear. However, I was still somewhat weary and talked into the phone.

“…Hello?”

“Hyahallo!”

An energetic, bright voice that gave rise to an urge to hang up on the spot greeted me from the other end. I moved the phone away from my ear and checked the screen again. On the screen read Yukinoshita Haruno.

Why was this person calling me? Or rather, why did this person know Komachi’s number…? With doubtful thoughts filling my head, I glared at the cellphone and “heeey” could be heard from the cellphone’s receiver.

But, I already picked up the phone so I had no choice, but to follow through. I gave up and placed the phone next to my ear.

“How may I help you?”

“In the middle of a fight with your little sister?”

When I asked her, she answered with an unrelated question. Did Komachi say something or was she just guessing at it? I guess the long unending feud between the sisters wasn’t just for show. Huh, I looked at myself and my stomach started to hurt so I wanted to stop.

“It’s not even much of a fight compared to what’s on your end.”

I told her sarcastically which caused Haruno-san to laugh.

“Ahaha, I see.”

“Actually, how do you know Komachi’s phone number?”

“You know, after the culture festival, I met her for a little bit, remember? We exchanged our numbers then.”

So that was when… That should’ve been the first time they ever talked to each other but apparently they exchanged numbers at that exact moment. Once again, my little sister’s range of relationships expanded even farther. Wait, didn’t this mean she had more contacts than I did?

“Let’s put that aside. I heard some things, you know. Are you sure you don’t want to go on the date you were invited to?”

“I wasn’t invited…”

What’s with this person? Did she call me just to slap me around with reality? Wait, did Hayama talk to her about this? Now that’s a line you didn’t have to cross…

As I thought how I should explain to her repeatedly that I wasn’t invited at all, a slightly gentle voice came from the other end of the phone.

“But Hayato did, so why not just go?”

“No, I’m obviously not going to go…”

Besides, that’d be just absurd. Even if I went, the girls’ faces would distort into expressions that took Hayama into consideration which would also be asking

“why was this person here?” In fact, I’d do just the same for them. I’d tell them “You don’t have to force yourselves, it’s fine! There’s always next time!” and once I went home, I’d end up making it easier for them to talk. What’s the deal with that? Which class reunion of mine was that?

“Oh, come on. Don’t you think it’s so romantic going on a date with a girl you used to like a long time ago?”

She teasingly laughed as she said that.

“I wouldn’t call that love.”

“What would you call love then, hmm?”

When I answered promptly, she returned back with a question. I didn’t need to think twice about it. From middle school to now, it was something I had already thought through. The words slipped out smoothly.

“It was just a one-sided interest, or, well, a misunderstanding, so it’s not genuine.”

Just because she talked to me and paid me some attention, I ended up getting curious myself and then I convinced myself that she was into me. And the result? It was nothing more than a misunderstanding. In the end, the simple truth of someone liking me was what I was really fond of. Something that selfish had no resemblance with the feelings of love.

The act of confessing was labeled with the words “to like” which ended up giving those feelings its definition. What was the truth then? If I was asked this question, I wasn’t confident I’d be able to answer. That applied even now.

I could hear sighs coming from the other end of the phone.

After what seemed to be a period of thinking, she chuckled. I couldn’t see her physically, but I was easily able to imagine her mouth distorting into an alluring smile.

Haruno-san’s voice reached my ears clear and vividly.

“You’re like some kind of monster of logic..”

“What’s that about? That’s not true.”

I was given an oddly cool name. I made a derisive laugh.

“I see. Then, how about a monster of self-consciousness?”

Haruno-san’s voice didn’t sound playful at all. I understood that she was saying it wholeheartedly.

Maybe that was why.

I felt mysteriously content with those words.

Indeed, my self-awareness was beyond saving and it was uncontrollable inside of me. That’s to say, it was likely the self-awareness that would even deny my own

self-awareness. It was the monster that awoke from its slumber after secluding itself at the dead-end of a maze-like existence in legends. In the end, that monster would be killed by the hero, I think.

As I was sucked into my own thoughts, an especially energetic voice brought me out of my daze.

"Anyway! You're to go on the date, got it?"

"No way, that day's a bit inconvenient for me, anyway."

Although I did play dumb, the words came out immediately. It's automatic.

"That's why it's on Friday now. You don't want to go out on a weekend right?"

But the enemy was quite sly. Haruno-san quickly reacted to my excuse. Wait a second, how did she know what I said in the first place? Did she hear that from Hayama too? Also, why was she deciding everything herself?

"Uh, that day is also a bit…"

"…Even though you went out with Yukino-chan? I mean, you even went with Gahama-chan too."

When she said that, the early summer and the summer break came to mind.

The reason was because she was present during those times. Well, she must've been one of those blessed people. They were the kind of people where it was natural for fun things to gravitate towards them. You could only see them as the chosen ones and that was quite rare.

Still, even considering those two things that came up, they weren't liable to be called dates.

But for both cases, that very well may not have been the point.

The words to properly describe those times were words I didn't know. So I decided to just list out whatever words I could think of.

"That was nothing more than just shopping and being a helper and stuff."

"Then this is just going out to have fun, right? You're just acting as Hayato's chaperon. You can also say that you're just walking in the same direction as them."

To go that far, even I didn't have an answer to that. If I were to associate a special meaning with the act of going out to have fun, then I had to dig out the special meanings of shopping and being a helper long ago.

Grrr… I choked on my words and Haruno-san pressed me further.

"Or could it be… you're expecting something to happen?"

"Obviously not."

There was no way I'd expect anything. When I answered immediately, an amused laughter echoed from the other end of the call.

“Then, what’s the problem? And besdies, Hayato isn’t someone who’d go lowering his head for a favor, you know.”

“Really? He asks for favors all the time, though.”

“He wouldn’t lower his head, though. He’s actually pretty prideful.”

Was that how it was?

“If you don’t show up, I’ll drop by your house and drag you along, okay!”

What the, were you a childhood friend? On top of that, you even knew where I live? That’s scary. Speaking of which, the Yukinoshita sisters and Hayato knew each other when they were younger.

While my head filled with unrelated thoughts, the phone forcefully hung up. She was quite the selfish person blurting out whatever she wanted to say, but I guess that was what made the person called Yukinoshita Haruno.

As Komachi instructed me earlier, I placed her phone on the table. I could’ve returned it to her in her room, but I imagined our exchange earlier would’ve been the same. Besides, she said she was going to sleep so she probably wouldn’t answer even if I called her… Well, she was probably just faking it anyway.

I was a bit tired after the long phone call.

I sunk back into the sofa and started to think again. At this rate, I was probably going to pass out on the sofa again like last time. It was probably better for me to get to my room while I was awake. That way, it’d be easier for Komachi to pick up her phone too.

The sound of the door opening and shutting echoed in the house and when I left the living room and arrived at my room, I collapsed on my bed.

I stared at the ceiling.

Even if it was just on the surface, I was going to go out to have fun with girls. Not to mention with the girl I confessed to long ago.

That said, I didn’t need to think about anything. All I had to do was blend in and wait until it was over. It was akin to being an advertisement for a store. Its only job was to stay put and wait as time continued to roll by.

This time would follow the same idea. I was nothing more than Hayama’s escort. I was a supplement. In a lunch box, that’d be the pickled vegetables. I couldn’t even become Baran. I also couldn’t become a Dragon Knight and I definitely couldn’t shoot Dragonic Aura either.

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In the time up to the day when I would go out with Hayama and the others, no one contacted me at all. Admittedly, they didn’t have a way to contact me so there wasn’t much they could do, but still, what’s with this… This feeling of being a supplement. For a supplement like me to be treated so roughly like this, weren’t the only similar treated things like food additives?

I made my way to school and as usual, I blended into the background and headed to my class.

It was a few moments before I would arrive at my seat.

And again as usual, Hayama was surrounded by his group of friends, Tobe, Miura, Yuigahama and so forth, at the back of the class. He was talking with them just like normal and even though he had plans to go hang out with girls today, he didn't feel that way at all.

He must have been used to it, that's why. I mean, for a supplement like me, I had to sit on my thumbs thinking "when are they gonna contact me? Still waiting" while feeling restless…

My restlessness may have been showing because Hayama noticed me and started maneuvering around the tables in my direction.

When he stood before me, he took some time wondering what he should talk about. But in the end, he spoke undisturbed with brevity.

"About today, when can you go?"

There was something wrong with the way he was asking me… Don't tell me he wanted to go together…?

"What about your club?"

Today was a weekday so Hayama should have club to attend unless he was implying I should wait until he was done. Definitely not doing that.

However, Hayama answered nonchalantly.

"It's a day off. Sometimes the fields are too crowded so we get a break instead."

True enough, the fields at our school weren't very big. The soccer club, the baseball club, the track and field club, and the rugby club were all sharing it. So sometimes, there would be these kinds of days.

"Aah, right… Then, just tell me where we're meeting up at then."

Whatever it was, there wasn't a point in going together from school to Chiba. Meeting at the designated spot was good enough.

Besides, I wasn't in the mood to continue this conversation any longer. I noticed Yuigahama was peeking over in our direction and I wanted to hurry up and be done.

When I told Hayama, he looked like he didn't want to make me wait any longer so he withdrew back a bit and took out his phone.

"I see… Do you mind if I get your number then?"

"Yeah."

I wrote my number down on the back of a printout. I lost my phone a lot at home so I remembered it pretty well. While my house phone was ringing, I'd end up remembering it…

"It's very like you to just give only your number."

As he recorded the written down number into his phone, Hayama chuckled. Buzz off. It's not like we're going to text each other so the number's good enough.

"Okay, I'll see you later then."

Hayama looked like he was done recording it and left for his seat with those parting words. Not bothering to see him off, I rested my chin on my hands and closed my eyes.

It was about nine hours until it was time to go to Chiba. Now that it's been determined that I'd be going out, I started to get less and less motivated.

It looked like I was going to spend the entire day in an increasingly gloomy fashion.

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As soon as the last homeroom class ended, I left the room faster than everyone else.

The place we were gathering at in Chiba was at the display in the front of the station. Orimoto and her friend were probably coming by train and it was an easy place to find so it was a good choice.

But it wasn't a place to be standing around for too long.

Because I headed for Chiba as soon as school ended, I arrived with slightly an hour to spare. I fastened my bike at an appropriate spot and decided to kill time at the café further down the street.

I entered the café, ordered a coffee, and sat near the window.

There wasn't much heating at this spot, but I was able to feel some of the open air which made the coffee delicious.

When it got cold, coffee became delicious. MAX coffee was pretty good throughout the year, but it was especially good during this time of the season.

But, well, other coffee brands were somewhat good this season as well … The coffee's so bitter.

I put on my earphones and opened up my book. While the café wasn't very fancy and somewhat plain, it was very relaxing.

I flipped page after page while songs played one after the other.

The cup I reached out to was warm.

I pulled back my cuffs and peeked at my wristwatch which reflected how much time had passed. There was still some time before the appointed time. As I

sat there absentmindedly thinking about what to do from here on, the street light that illuminated the dark city suddenly got dark.

Something was tapping against the glass window.

When I turned to face the window, the person who was waving her hand at me was Yukinoshita Haruno… Why the heck was this person here?

Haruno-san's mouth was flapping open and closed saying illegible things. Since she was beyond the glass, there was no way I could hear her so I twisted my head. Haruno-san shrugged her shoulders and headed for the entrance of the store.

Still, even though we were separated with just one sheet of glass, I became fully aware of how Yukinoshita Haruno, objectively, was an existence that naturally attracted attention. Passing by guys would sneak a glance at her and send her looks saying "this girl's pretty cute". Even when she was inside the store, Haruno was still attracting a lot of attention.

She bought a coffee at the register and sat at the seat across from me.

"What are you doing…?"

That was the first thing that came out of my mouth.

Haruno poured in milk and sugar in her coffee and used her spoon to mix it. And then she made an incredibly amused, wicked smile. Ugh, your face looked a lot blacker than the coffee.

"Just here to check on the date that someone resembling a little brother and my little brother in law are on. As the older sister, of course I'd be interested, right?"

"Again, I'm not your little brother in law…"

"Someone resembling a little brother" was probably referring to Hayama. They actually gave off that image considering Haruno was three years older. But the way she said it made it sound as if the two of us were on a date so could you please stop that…?

As I thought depressingly, Haruno-san added something that sounded as if she was talking to herself.

"Besides… I'm a little curious as to why he'd go that far to get Hikigaya-kun to tag along."

The smile she made earlier wasn't the same smile that she made now. It was much more frightening and sly.

But if you took a look at the Hayama at school, you'd sort of understand what his reasons were. In the end, he was just feeling awkward about how someone was left out. Even though I was present when they met for the first time, I wasn't invited. He probably didn't like that.

That's why it wasn't anything worth worrying about for someone like Haruno. In fact, the one I was curious about was Yukinoshita Haruno.

“You sure have a lot of time…”

I voiced the concern I had in mind and Haruno made a nonchalant expression and responded back.

“It’s quite normal for a college student with money and excellent grades.”

Crap, she did some subtle bragging.

Still, college students really had a lot of time on their hands… Well, this probably just applied to those who didn’t have a part time job, research, or homework to do.

That was fine and all, but there were surely plenty of things they could do to spend their time on. In the first place, college students didn’t even attend their classes. In the spring, they’d go flower viewing; in the summer, they’d have a BBQ; in the fall, they’d dress up for Halloween; in the winter, they’d have a hot pot party. The entire year would consist of drinking alcohol or so was the image associated with them. The places they would mainly inhabit would be at someone’s place near the college, at the arcade, the slot machines, or maybe even some Mahjong parlor. If college was really like that, I don’t think I’d fit in…

Haruno-san didn’t give off that image though. But that begged the question: what does this person normally do…? As I thought about how mysterious she was, I suddenly thought up a concern and asked her.

“Do you not have very many friends?”

“That’s right and the only person who really ever gives me the time is just Hikigaya-kun you see…”

She purposely pretended to break into tears. Whoaaa, she’s so bothersome.

Still, it was kind of hard to pass it off as just a joke.

Haruno-san was the type who’d be fine even if she was alone. Besides, considering that she was Yukinoshita’s older sister, for her to be isolated would be expected.

She was idolized and because of her excellent outward appearances which also had a completely black side to it, she garnered respect. With that in mind, there were probably a lot of people who approached her with the objective to get along with her. It was true that I’ve seen her hanging out with friends before though.

But I imagined there weren’t very many people she had established an equal relationship with.

Maybe that was why she was always so persistent with her little sister who was nearing the same position.

Noticing that I went quiet suddenly, Haruno-san spoke up with a bitter smile.

“Well, earlier was just a joke, but I don’t plan on getting in your way or anything today, so you don’t have to worry.”

When I snapped back to reality, I responded immediately.

“Ah, sure. Do whatever you want.”

“Oh, what a surprising response.”

Haruno-san blinked with surprise. But surely it wasn’t that surprising. I actually wouldn’t have minded if she did come to be a nuisance. In fact, I’d love it if she came to destroy the entire thing ASAP. That way I could get home earlier.

“Hmm, I’ll take you up on your offer then. And it’s just about time.”

With the appointed time approaching, Haruno-san checked her wrist watch and spoke. I also looked at my watch. It was indeed about time. If I left the store now, I’d make it there at the right time. Let’s take it easy and get over there.

I quickly gathered my belongings that were fairly organized and stood up from my seat. When I did, the sitting Haruno-san grinned at me.

“Okay, try your best!”

“Sure, I’ll try my best to not get in the way.”

As expected, Haruno-san didn’t look like she was going to tag along. She was probably going to hang out and watch accordingly.

“Have fun!”

Haruno-san waved her hands in front of her and sent me off. I turned my neck slightly, nodded to her, and left the store.

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The sun sank into the horizon and the night side of the city began to surface. At the front of the station were numerous of people waiting for their appointment just like me.

It was a Friday night. There were probably a lot of people who were going out to drink tonight as well.

Couples who just arrived exchanged a few words with each other and went their way arm in arm.

I pulled back my sleeve and checked the time. It was exactly five in the evening. This was the time we were supposed to meet up. Being the first one here gave the impression that I was really looking forward to this outing so I wasn’t very happy about it. That said, if I was late instead, then I’d end up causing trouble for everyone else despite being nothing more than the tacked-on supplement.

Either way, I was in a problematic position. I should avoid walking at the front and keep myself from being a hindrance to a minimum. It looked like I was going to have a lot on my plate for the next few hours.

Moments before it turned five, Hayama was the first to show up. It looked like he came by train as he was mixed in with the crowd of people exiting from the

ticket gates. But even in the hordes of people, he was still remarkably noticeable that his figure naturally entered my line of sight.

Hayama adjusted his bolo tie as he looked around and seemed to have noticed me. He raised his hand slightly and headed my way.

"My bad for being late."

"Nah, you got here just on time."

A minute or two was within the margin of error. I wasn't all that much of a stickler when it came to time so I didn't mind it.

Now it was time for the girls to come… As I thought that while surveying the immediate area, Hayama stood next to me and did the same thing. While doing that, Hayama looked like he was having trouble trying to say something.

"…Sorry for making you tag along. You really helped me out, thanks."

"Whatever. I only came because the older Yukinoshita scares me. If you're gonna thank someone, thank her."

In truth, if it wasn't for Haruno contacting me, I definitely wouldn't have showed up. It may not mean much coming from me, but I was rather weak to older girls telling me this and that. Oh, but one shouldn't forget that I was also weak to the pleas of little sisters. Even I'd hesitate a little if a girl classmate asked me for help. Oh dear, girls are super scary.

It really didn't hit me that Hayama would get me where I was weak so it turned out favorably for him. The expansive range of his buddy-buddy disease made me apprehensive. These words weren't exactly warning words, but I'd at least like to get in a complaint or two.

"But really, you really had to ask that person just to get me to…"

"Ah, is that them?"

Hayama cut me off midway through my sentence. He pointed in a direction that was still quite far away, but the walking figures that appeared were Orimoto and her friend.

When they noticed the two of us waiting, they rushed over to us.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"Sorry for being a bit late…"

Orimoto didn't appear to mind something as trivial as the time as she raised her hand while her friend Nakamachi or whatever looked apologetic as she bowed her head.

"Not at all… Shall we get going?"

Hayama smiled gently and started walking. Orimoto and her friend followed after him. It looked like Hayama explained the situation beforehand. When the two girls arrived, they didn't make a face asking why I was here.

“First was a movie, I think?”

Hayama turned around and slowed his pace to which the girls adjusted theirs. They approached him and began talking.

I started following them one step later.

It’s not like I was acting like a Yamato Nadeshiko or anything. Of course, it did look like I was being considerate given how far apart we were, but there was a bigger reason for this.

When we met up with Orimoto and her friend, something felt oddly out of place.

If I were to put it into words, then it was this anticlimactic feeling that made me wonder “was this how it really went?”. Regardless of how superficial your outing with the girls was, it was a pretty big event for guys in high school.

That’s why I thought it was surprising to be feeling out of place.

Even the times during the early summer and the summer break were different. I even preached to myself to not misunderstand the situation. But, today, I didn’t have that worry at all.

That’s to say, I didn’t know what to think…

In fact, when Hayama showed up, there was at least a small reaction from me. Nah, like that’d be true.

I listened to their conversation along the way in silence.

As for what the plans were today, we were going to watch a movie followed by shopping. Along the way, we’d stop by an arcade, get something to eat, and then we were done. That was the general gist of it.

It felt really standard.

And fifteen minutes had passed since we started moving.

The only things that came out of my mouth so far consisted of only these six types: “Sure”, “No”, “Well”, “Aah”, “That so”, “I see”. I was pretty sure beat’-em up fighter games had more voiceovers than this…

On second thought, didn’t the fact that I could perfectly communicate with just these limited choices meant my communicative ability was super high? Then obviously those who didn’t bother to talk to me were the chumps with the inferior ability to communicate.

After talking about various things and making a few stops here and there, we finally arrived at the movie theater. The distance from the station to here was only about five minutes if you went alone, but it took a rather long time with the four of us.

In any case, the first plan was the movie.

Although we entered the movie theater, what movie we would watch was something decided by the girls and I, of course, was never given the right to contribute. But fortunately, they picked the movie I didn't get to watch last time so I was actually pretty happy.

Hayama quickly bought the tickets. That's so Hayama~! So reliableee~!

Times like these were where I may have been obligated to contribute something extra, but I was just a supplement after all. For the supplement that had the primary purpose of filling the number count, its existence was a matter of fact. Please don't expect anything too glamorous.[1]

It looked like they had researched the times for the movie since we immediately went into the theater without having to wait.

The seating order was Hayama in between the two girls with me sitting next to Orimoto. It was a decided fact that Hayama would be in between the girls so it happened very smoothly. The remaining problem was where I would sit. The most suitable choice was next to Orimoto given that we were acquaintances.

We took our seats, but the movie wasn't going to start immediately. There were people talking all over, er, that is, there was talking to my immediate right. They were talking in energetic, small whispers.

I rested my weight on the left armrest of the chair and my body assumed a natural posture that faced to the right. It was the Miroku[2] half-lotus meditative sitting position also known as the "ah, yeah, I hear ya, I hear ya" pose. This pose made it look like you were kind of participating in the conversation. You didn't have to be considerate of anyone and no one would force themselves to talk to you either.

Eventually, the lights in the theater darkened. Everyone went quiet simultaneously.

In the dim theater, the movie robber[3] began to slither around. Recently, the movie burglar had become the face of movie theaters. Once the character that everybody was familiar had appeared on screen, chuckles could be heard.

As I watched the screen, there were taps on the right armrest. When I made a sidelong glance, Orimoto covered her mouth with her hand and said in a quiet voice.

"Hikigaya at the movies, huh? I bet everyone in middle school would freak out so hard huh?"

"Probably…"

"Totally!"

Orimoto held back her laughter as she nodded.

Damn right. I'm sure those guys from middle school would definitely freak out.

Honestly, even I was freaked out.

I'm sure myself from back then would freak out too. Rather than be happy, he'd dig himself a hole and jump in it. He'd just spout incomprehensible excuses. "This really wasn't like that, really. I didn't really want to go out, really." He definitely wouldn't go too. I really didn't understand the logic that fueled my mysterious purity in my middle school days.

Well, it's not like anything fundamentally changed, but for me to come out to a place like this, I guess I may have gone through some sort of growth.

At the very least, I don't misunderstand or make the wrong assumptions anymore.

Even if there was someone sitting next to me, even if their face was close to me, I wouldn't get any funny ideas about them at all.

As I left the weight of my body up to the left armrest, Orimoto did the same to the right armrest on my end.

This feeling of distance was somehow nostalgic. Thinking back on it, I get the feeling things were the same back in middle school. Considering the situation now, as trivial as it was, Orimoto and I had never been this close before. But this was something the person Orimoto Kaori would do with the people she had no interest in. That was all it was.

However, right now, I felt I could finally put an end to what never got started.

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When we exited the movie theater, my cheeks were subjected to the cold wind.

In the two hours we were watching the movie, the temperature had dropped.

In regards to the movie, it was pretty decent. There were plenty of highlights and I wasn't bored at all. It was very Hollywood if I say so myself.

I wasn't the only one with impressions. Hayama and the other two were actually just talking about it at that moment. It was basically that. There was a reason why it was easy to pick a movie for a date. That's because it gave you something to talk about right after a movie; something like that was definitely bound to be written in an issue of Hot-Dog PRESS[4].

As Nakamachi went "that was pretty amazing" and "it was interesting", Hayama would smile and nod. Orimoto would join in on the conversation.

"Like seriously, wasn't that explosion really loud? Like Hikigaya was acting totally weird when it happened! Talk about hilarious! The way he was moving was so creepy that it made me laugh!"

"Well, the sound was a lot louder than I thought it'd be…"

I was swept into the conversation so I responded for the time being. After all, ignoring someone when they called your name gave a bad impression. Anyway, the important thing today was to not get in the way.

Hayama followed after my words.

“Aah, yeah I was a little surprised too.”

“But weren’t you like super calm about it, Hayama?”

Nakamachi stayed next to Hayama and said that while looking at him. When she did, Orimoto lined up next to them not wanting to lose and clapped her hands in exaggeration.

“Ah, I thought that too! I was a little surprised too, but Hayama was completely fine huh~. Buut, the way Hi-Hikigaya mov…!”

The laugh she was holding in burst out and Orimoto’s body shook. Nakamachi looked at me and started chuckling as well.

R-Right… D-Did everyone enjoy my clown acts (unwelcome eyes)?

Anyway, even if they’re laughing at me, as a supplement, if I wasn’t getting in their way, then all was well.

Hayama looked at the two girls with a mixed smile and when he quickly looked at his watch, he spoke in an urging tone.

“We should hurry or we won’t have much time to look around.”

“Ah, right. When do the shops close again?”

Orimoto asked. I, of course, wouldn’t know the answer to that question. Besides, I didn’t even know which stores we were going to, you know… Why did I have to partake in a mystery tour of my own home chown[5]?

Nakamachi dabbled with her phone. Apparently she was looking it up.

“Um, at 8:30 it says.”

“No way! Crap! Don’t we, like, totally have no time?”

Orimoto took out her cellphone hurriedly and looked at the time. It was just about 7:30 PM. So we had about an hour left. I didn’t know how long it took for girls to shop, but there probably wasn’t much wiggle room.

Everybody’s pace naturally became faster.

From what I could tell from Hayama’s pace, the plan was to leave the Nampa-Dori Street towards the PARCO shopping center. So that meant we were going to PARCO.

Still, Nampa-Dori[6] was a terrible name. There was also a bridge in Kaihin-Makuhari called the Nampa Bridge. What’s going on with Chiba?

We continued while taking sneak peeks at various stores along the way until finally arriving at a big intersection. On the other end was a large park where you could see a lot of young people skateboarding and dancing.

Now then, next thing on the schedule was shopping.

We entered PARCO and while we ascended up the escalator, there were conversations about what kind of clothes would be good for their winter uniform, muffler, and so forth and I wasn't included.

We then made it to the second floor.

The floor was littered with stores that high school girls could kill some time at: Women Fashion, Interior, and miscellaneous stores.

Interior and the miscellaneous stores had sofas and beds which allowed you to relax as much as you wanted allowing you to soak in the soothing atmosphere. If the two of you sat on the same sofa, then you just might get closer; that is, if you were to think about it from the perspective of Hot-Dog PRESS.

But as far as clothes and accessories were concerned, I was completely clueless about what was good.

What exactly was the right way for guys to pass the time at times like these?

The last time I went shopping in the women area, I felt pretty ashamed, but it made me think about how it really felt back then.

What I did was pretend to be fooling around.

But today, that didn't seem to be necessary.

Was it because Hayama was here or was it because we were a boy and girl group of four? The store clerk didn't seem particularly suspicious this time around.

If we were choosing gifts for someone, then it was possible for me to give my opinion on the matter. But as far as those girls were concerned, I had absolutely no idea.

I stood there idly next to Hayama as the time went on.

"Hayama, how's this?"

"Ah, how about this one?"

Orimoto and Nakamachi began their fashion show for Hayama. Hayama looked like he was going to be occupied.

On the other hand, I had plenty of time to kill so I decided to fool around. I imagined I was acting as a bodyguard of an important individual while staking out the area. I placed my hands on my ear discretely as if someone was contacting me through a wireless device and pretended to look for possible sniper positions.

And something of interest came up on my lookout.

There was a familiar sounding voice.

"But you know, trying on clothes is fine and all, but it doesn't matter since we have uniforms on right?"

"You're the one that wanted to check out boots, Yumiko…"

As I cautiously looked for the origin of those voices, I came across the figures of my classmates in a store diagonal from here.

It was Miura Yumiko standing in front of a mirror with an unconvinced face and Ebina Hina with a resigned expression.

“Definitely black, huh?”

She murmured to herself, grabbed the black leather boots and changed into them. She stood in front of the mirror again with a pensive expression. There, Ebina who was watching her looked like something came to mind. She clapped her hands and a huge smile formed on her entire face.

“Ah, wouldn’t that be good? Black boots with your uniform really gives you the impression you’re into some sorta maniac play.”

“…Nevermind. Also, say something like that again and I’ll boot you.”

With just the boots, I imagine.

Miura made an obvious, disgruntled face and took off the boots. Her expression alone made her look upset, but she looked like she was actually having a lot of fun.

All was well if they were having fun. But, it did bug me a little how Yuigahama wasn’t there. Whenever they go shopping or out to have fun, the image of the three of them being together seemed natural. I guess she had stuff to do.

“I guess Suede would be good after all?”

Ebina took something else from another rack and slowly turned around towards Miura. In the middle of that, Ebina’s eyes met with mine which was on them the entire time.

“Ah.”

The last time we had a face to face encounter was probably during the field trip. A passing silence came about as we both wondered how to respond to the other.

During that time, thinking it was strange, Miura turned her head.

“Ebina, what’s wrong?”

And then, she noticed me, well, more accurately speaking, she noticed Hayama further in the store. She also happened to see the girls with him as well.

“Ha-Haya…”

Miura’s loosely, curled blonde hair fluttered as she stood up abruptly.

But the boots she took off caught her feet and she marvelously fell over.

Panties! They’re pink! Didn’t expect that!

Whoa, close one. I was this close to thinking “so glad I decided to go out today~!”.

“W-Wha, Yumiko! Are you okay!?”

Ebina alarmingly ran up to Miura and supported her up.

Miura was groaning in tears from the pain. It looked like she hurt her butt when she fell down as she was holding it as she stood up. Noticing this, Ebina gently began rubbing it. What’s with this painting?

“Kuuuuuuuuuh, ugh, Ha-Haya…”

With the pain not subsiding, Miura looked at Hayama with wet eyes.

Aah, that looked painful. Both your heart and your body.

Still, to see a girl who’s usually so confident and strong-willed in tears was quite the view!

Or whatever, but this wasn’t the time to be impressed. Based on Miura’s reaction, there was still some time before she would recover. Once that happened, there was no doubt she’d come marching over here to Hayama and pick a fight with Orimoto and her friend. If she brought that dreadfulness of hers that she showed when she saw Isshiki that last time, it’d be really problematic. After all, I’d probably end up staying out longer and getting home later.

I stealthily maneuvered my way towards Hayama’s back and spoke to him in a whisper.

“Hayama. We should probably go somewhere else.”

“Eh?”

When I said that, Hayama checked his watch. No, I wasn’t talking about the time. I was talking about something more fearsome.

But Hayama arbitrarily looked convinced for one reason or another and whispered, “Yeah, that seems right.” He then called out to Orimoto and her friend.

“I actually have something I wanted to look at.”

After he called out to them, Orimoto and Nakamachi returned the clothes and accessories they grabbed to their original places.

“Suure. Whatcha gonna look at it?”

“Shall we get going first?”

He evaded Orimoto’s question and led the girls by walking ahead.

We made some distance from Miura and Ebina and now it was time for Hayama's shopping.

As of now, there were zero plans for my shopping. Nah, it's not like I had anything I wanted. I mean, the only place I'd go to would be a book store and I'd rather just go by myself if that was the case.

"I wanted to check out some snowboarding gear."

Hayama spoke as he headed in the direction of the escalator. Sportswear were typically on the sixth floor.

Coming from the descending escalator were noisy voices.

"Irohasu. Like I said, Murasaki Sports is good enough, ya know?"

"No, that won't do. Ah, wasn't there a Lions Sports store near the west entrance?"

"Wait up, that store's for baseball, ya know. It just has "sports" in the name, that's all."

It was two people; one with flaxen short bobbed hair and the other with brown-dyed long hair. In their hands were the bags of the sports shop we were about to head to.

"Oh, oh? Ain't that Hayato?"

After getting to the bottom, Tobe noticed Hayama first. And then he started bawling.

"Yoo, Haaaayaatoo!"

"What's up, Tobe?"

Hayama asked in a confused manner with Tobe suddenly clinging on to him. Tobe had a displeased expression and while openly pulling his hair, he began complaining.

"Hear me out yo. Irohasu suddenly wanted a new jersey all of a sudden so we came out here to do some shopping and now she only talks about protein…"

As he continued to talk, Orimoto, her friend, and I finally came into his sight. Tobe choked on his words and took two steps back. Apparently he thought we were on a double date (lol).

"Eh… Ah, my bad, seriously was I intrudin'? My bad, my bad! I'll be goin' on right ahead. Right, Irohasu?"

Tobe was flustered as he spoke and when he turned to look at Isshiki, she wasn't there.

That's because Isshiki had already found her spot next to me.

So fast! Irohasu so fast! Freaky!

"Senpai, what's wrooong? Ah, are you fooling around?"

She spoke in an airy manner with a grin on her face. Those words were common to say when you came across your upperclassman in the city. But oddly enough, it had some impact.

Because somehow, it sounded like she was saying “you sure have some courage to be forgetting about my request and going out to have fun with girls instead, huh”. No, no, I really didn’t’ forget, okay? And as for your request, I already did think it over in my own way so…

“Uh, it’s not like I’m fooling around or anything…”

As I thought about how to explain myself, Isshiki gripped my sleeves and looked at me with upturned eyes resembling a small animal. What the heck? She sure was cute, wait a second, how problematic.

As I grew suspicious of her, she continued to pull at my sleeve. An unexpected force caused me to drop my shoulders and I leaned slightly forward.

When I did, my face descended to just about Isshiki’s height. Isshiki, who was right next to me, made a perky smile. Her lightly pink, shaking lips began to move.

“But really, who is that woman? Ah! Your girlfriend perhaps? Eh, but wait, there’re two of them… How are they related, hmm?”

Scary… You’re really scary.

How were you making such a happy smile with that coldhearted voice of yours…?

“Nah, well, you know…”

As I pondered about how I should answer to defuse the situation, Hayama called out to Isshiki.

“Iroha, sorry. I actually had him come with me.”

“Aaah, so that’s how it is~. Ah, I’m actually about to go somewhere too, would you like to go together?”

She quickly let go of my sleeve and made a turn in the direction of Hayama. She was surprisingly forceful, wasn’t she?

Around there was Tobe who was trying to call Isshiki over. Thank goodness I was freed from her grasp…

“C’mon Irohasu. We should get goin’ already. Yeah?”

“You two were in the middle of shopping right…? Okay, Iroha, Tobe. I’ll catch you two later.”

Hayama softly raised his hand and Isshiki did the same and waved back while cutely going “daaang”.

“Okaaay. See you later then.”

Isshiki then waved her hands at me.

“Next time we meet senpai, please fill me in on the details, okay~.”

Ah, nevermind, I wasn’t free from her after all. She’ll definitely make me spill the beans the next time we meet…

Anyway, the next time we’d meet would probably be the day of the election. Then again, we probably would need to meet at least one more time before the actual day of the event.

It’s fine if the speech that would cause Isshiki to lose by a motion of no confidence wasn’t all that great, but should it be too poorly thought out, then it would cause her image to drop. That said, there’s always the slight chance that she’d get voted for regardless of how trashy the campaign speech was. This was a rather difficult consideration to take into account.

In any case, it was something that would be settled in a single moment. I’ll try to talk with her early next week… So how should I explain today’s outing, I wonder?

As I thought about how I was needlessly entrusted with more worrisome issues, I saw Isshiki and Tobe off.

While walking, Tobe would go “alrighty”, “lez go!” and other stuff, trying to be considerate of Isshiki by being energetic. What a good fellow.

“Alrighty! Irohasu, let’s head to the Lions Sports store!”

“Ah, that’s fine. That store’s primarily for baseball anyway.”

“Eh?”

I could hear a very pitiful voice in their direction.

“…She really is something.”

As I saw them off, I blurted out my impressions. Having heard that, Hayama made a bitter smile.

“Yeah. She really is a handful.”

“You don’t say…”

Oh? You bragging? Ah? So I was thinking, but Hayama said something surprising.

“So Iroha acts like that around you too, huh…?”

“Huh?”

I asked him, not understanding what he meant. Suddenly, Hayama made a serious face.

“…It’s not like she only does it with me, but Iroha meets with a lot of people and she tends to want to show off her cute side. I’m sure she thinks that she has a certain image of herself she has to protect. I’m sure she wants to be loved. That’s why it’s rare for her to show off her honest side like that.”

Doesn't that just mean she didn't want me to like her that she was able to show her true colors…?

As the two descended the escalator and disappeared, Orimoto and Nakamachi who were standing a distance away came over. Were they being considerate or did they think it was a good idea not to get any closer with the curly haired Tobe and the obviously, wary Isshiki present?

We ascended the escalator to the sixth floor. When we made it to the top, we entered the sports store that was immediately in front of us.

"Were those your friends earlier?"

"Yeah, they're in the soccer club with me."

Hayama answered Nakamachi's question. Orimoto joined in on the conversation with an appropriately, surprised reaction.

"I totally get that! They really gave off that feeling!"

Was that so…? Tobe really didn't give off the impression that he played soccer. Though if you asked what fit him then, I wouldn't be able to answer. I wasn't interested in knowing after all.

But it wasn't like Orimoto was interested in Tobe.

"Hayama, you look like you'd play soccer. Did you do it when you were younger?"

Apparently this was what she wanted to ask.

"Yeah. But I only seriously got into it in middle school."

Hoo. That's a shocker. I guess the junior youth fit his image. I didn't actually say this out loud, but it may have been showing on my face as Hayama made a bitter smile and added.

"Well, in elementary, I did a lot of things, but I never did get around to doing soccer, that's all."

As I thought, "oh, I see", I nodded. Then again, this reaction felt like I had more interest in Hayama than the girls here. Really, I didn't care and I was only listening because I had nothing better to do.

It was a bit awkward so I decided to deflect it off by fiddling with the hanging sportswear and the hand grippers.

But now that I thought about it, Hayama was a man full of mystery. It's not like I ever bothered to try to learn anything about him, but he never really talked about himself. And that somehow resembled Yukinoshita in some way. Was this what they call the modesty of high society?

Thanks to that, even my disinterested disposition caused me to listen to his story. The two girls, of course, took the bait.

"Oooh. But wasn't your middle school pretty strong, Hayama?"

“Wow. Our middle school’s club was totally weak. Right?”

Orimoto turned only her head in my direction and wanted a confirmation. To make fun of your own environment to flatter the other party was, well, the modesty of the middle class. I returned a nod.

When I did, Orimoto looked like she suddenly thought of something and went “ah”.

“Speaking of which, Hikigaya. You weren’t in any clubs, but didn’t you, like, get an award for the sports test or something?”

“Yeah.”

Now that she mentioned it, something like that did happen… Then again, the so called “sports test” was simply students recording each other’s results. Everyone typically recorded down whatever results they felt like. In my case, my partner always had no motivation and for the 20 meter shuttle run, they’d be too tired and would just put whatever number they could. Thanks to that, I got an A. But even without that, the standards were pretty loose anyway. There were a lot of people who got A’s in the class after all.

Of course, I imagine Hayama got the same grade as well.

Hayama reached out for some of the sportswear and suddenly spoke up.

“Don’t you get something like a medal for that?”

Hayama pulled from his vague memories. Thanks to that, the door to my memories flung open.

“Yeah, yeah! So, like, during the closing ceremony, when Hikigaya went out front to receive it, everyone sort of just burst out laughing!”

Orimoto exploded into laughter as if she remembered what it was like back then. Nakamachi started going off too as she put her hand on her lips because she was imagining how it went.

Ahaha. I totally made a dry laugh myself.

Stuff like that was pretty common when a guy who normally didn’t stand out suddenly became the center of attention. It was similar to when you were reading out loud in Japanese or English. Bringing attention to the culture was the modesty of the lower classes.

The two looked satisfied after a good laugh and started grabbing different sportswear that would fit Hayama while going “snowboard might be fun, huh!”.

As I watched them two steps behind, Hayama quietly came to my side.

“…You sure had an odd middle school life.”

“Buzz off.”

It wasn’t all that odd. There were probably plenty of other people who had the same experience. If anything, Hayama seemed to fit the bill more.

But Hayama apparently didn't mean it that way. He shrugged his shoulders and continued.

"I'm not talking about that… During middle school, I heard you liked her?"

He said that and looked at Orimoto.

"So that was your type, huh…? Kind of surprising."

"You sure are annoying…"

Hayama's smile looked like it was making fun of me. Hayama was the type to not break his smile with his good social manners, but this was the first time I had seen him having a good time.

But he didn't have to tell me. I already knew.

I would even dare to say it was nothing, but youthful indiscretion on my part.

Even if I turned my head the other way, the fact that I thought I liked Orimoto Kaori wouldn't change and that I also confessed to her as well. But that didn't mean Orimoto was the only special one.

"It's not like it was just Orimoto. Completely wrong, I'd say. Girls that were quieter or the more noisy ones were the ones I li… well, those types."

Actually saying the word like was a little too embarrassing for me. I hesitated for a bit before trying to play it off.

"I wouldn't say those types were what you liked."

Hayama made a bitter smile. That mature attitude of his ticked me off. An indescribable irritation started to swell inside of me. I held it in and spoke slowly.

"…Besides, that may be the case back then, but that doesn't mean it'll be that way now."

"…Right."

Hayama nodded, looking convinced. Our conversation ended there.

Even so, Hayama continued to stand next to me.

We stood there silently while listening to the BGM playing in the background and Orimoto and her friend's lively chatter.

"So basically…"

Hayama suddenly spoke up.

But he sounded like he was having difficulty speaking and his words cut off. As I thought about whether he had more to say, I turned to look at his face and Hayama quietly averted his gaze elsewhere. It was directed somewhere far away, somewhere not in the vicinity of the store.

"So basically, you've never really actually liked someone, huh?"

Those were words that seized my stomach. In that moment, my breathing had stopped. By reflex, there were no words I could muster out. It was something I never really ever thought about.

But I intuitively felt that staying silent wasn't something I should do and I slightly opened my mouth. Even so, my voice wouldn't come out.

As I stood there with no words to respond with, Hayama made a self-derisive smile.

"…Both you and me."

He quietly looked up as if he was looking at the sky. Hayama's profile looked like he was repenting for something.

"That's why I misunderstood."

His small murmur melted in the atmosphere and vanished.

"Hayamaa, how's this?"

Orimoto's voice came from far away. Hayama strongly closed his eyes once and quickly opened them. It was his usual refreshing, smiling face.

"Which one?"

He walked towards Orimoto and her friend as he said that. The way he walked off was the Hayama Hayato that I knew.

However, the Hayama Hayato that I didn't know had a sorrowful expression that looked like he was going to cry.

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While they were picking out sportswear, it was just about closing time for the shops. So that meant we were entering the last stretch of my long job as a supplement. When we made it outside, it was completely dark out as well as cold.

Hayama checked his watch and called out to Orimoto and her friend.

"Are you guys a bit hungry?"

"Yep!"

Orimoto immediately responded and Hayama made a bitter smile. At a time like this, he wouldn't go so far as to blow off the self-proclaimed refreshing Orimoto. But, I think at times like this was when uncle should be showing off his shy side.

"Okay, what should we eat?"

When Hayama asked, Nakamachi looked lost in thought for a moment, but replied modestly.

"Anything's fine with me."

"What to eat, huh?"

Orimoto spun around and looked at me. Her expression had hints of amusement mixed in it.

Well, if they asked for my opinion, then I'd answer. I wanted to go home early so I had to choose somewhere close to here. In which case, an appropriate choice would be a store immediately right outside.

"Saize, maybe?"

I thought about how Chiba's Saizeriya had covered a lot of bases. So my decision came out quickly. But after hearing that, Nakamachi had an apathetic look in her eyes.

"…Ehhh."

Didn't you just say you were fine with anything…? So, what? You don't like Saize? Or is it me you don't like?

Actually, forget about me, apologize to Saize right now. Even if you hate me, please don't hate Saize!

On the other hand, Orimoto held her stomach while going "Saize… Saize, huh… Sa, i, ze…" and burst out into laughter. As I thought about how we were never going to pick anything at this rate, Hayama came in to mediate.

"Well, I guess we shouldn't get anything too heavy, so why don't we settle for that café over there?"

Hayama pointed in the direction of a café across the street. It was a store that looked chic and hip so the girls nodded in agreement. They definitely only said yes because Hayama suggested it, didn't they…? Had I blurted this out, I couldn't see a future where everything would work out peacefully. It was basically that. "The law decrees that you don't get popular from being in a band, but you get popular because you're a popular guy in a band." Something like that.

In any case, we crossed the street and entered the store.

The inside was moderately warm and the dim lighting of the store made the atmosphere very comfortable.

After each of us made our respective orders, we ascended to the seats on the second floor.

The dim store was somewhat empty probably because of the late time.

There were several people sitting at the seats to the side of the stairs and at the window counter was one person. Further in were open tables. With our group, we decided to move over there.

From this position, the seats for smokers at the counter that were separated by a sheet of glass could be seen on the other side.

And there was a female customer with a hat covering her eyes wearing headphones and of course, she didn't have an ashtray prepared since that was only for smoking customers.

She really did come along…

Yukinoshita Haruno secretly waved in such a way that only I could see.

Well, it didn't look like she planned on getting in the way so there's no harm in leaving her alone… She hadn't done anything yet so far, after all.

Also, Hayama should have noticed too. But since he hadn't said anything, there was no doubt he was ignoring her.

Orimoto and her friend didn't seem to have noticed Haruno at all though. But if you thought about it, that was obvious. It probably never hit them that the older sister in college would come to check out her friend she treats as a little brother on his date. Not that I would think of it either.

What's more, the girls were dreamily engrossed in talking with Hayama. Anything else wouldn't come into their view. Ah, I wasn't included either as weeeeell.

Due to the warm drinks, the girls were speaking smoothly. I sat there listening to their conversation in silence. For the most part, I made sure not forget to respond accordingly while I blew at my coffee to cool it down.

As I raised my head and thought how the coffee had finally cooled down, the conversation had stopped.

Orimoto looked like she didn't know what to say and looked at me. Eh, what, did I need to say something? I grew apprehensive for a moment, but it turned out I didn't need to worry.

Orimoto made a laugh and spoke in a ridiculing way.

"But Saizeriya's just out of the question!"

"Yeah, no way."

Nakamachi giggled in the same way.

…Hoh. So, sorry to ask, what was your name again, Whatmachi?

I suppose it was understandable for Orimoto to use me for jokes considering she knew the particulars back in middle school. In fact, it was appropriate. But, for her friend to be doing the same thing was just a little bit questionable…

Once you looked down on someone, then you could say whatever you want. Before I knew it, I was branded as the character you could say whatever you wanted to and do whatever you wanted to.

With that acting as the groundwork for everything, as long it was Orimoto, or rather, my past self that caused it to be created, there was nothing I could do.

I resigned myself to deal with it. Aah, coffee and life were really bitter.

I made a bitter, forced smile. While my mouth twitched, sitting next to me was Hayama who put down his cup.

“I’m not really fond of that…”

“Ah, I know, right!”

Nakamura responded as if she didn’t know what he was referring to.

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

Hayama smiled.

He spoke in a voice that was sweeter than chocolate and as if he was trying to gently admonish their misunderstanding.

“I’m talking about you two.”

He spoke with a voice as bright as the sun.

“E-Ermm…”

Orimoto and Nakamachi responded in confusion as if they didn’t process what they were told. I wasn’t quite able to perceive the meanings of his words and got confused myself.

Everyone was speechless and the quietly playing BGM in the store sounded louder than usual.

And in that silence were the sounds of footsteps. The sound came from the stairs and it was heading in our direction.

“…Looks like they’re here.”

Hayama muttered and stood up.

And then he raised his hand quickly and in the direction of his look stood Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. They were in their uniforms with their bags on their way home.

I reflexively stood up when these unexpected visitors showed up.

“You guys…”

“Hikki…”

Yuigahama had a lonely smile, standing there dumbfounded. She strongly squeezed the straps of her backpack on her back.

And beside her, Yukinoshita was looking at us authoritatively. Her cold eyes that wouldn’t show any emotions didn’t change even after meeting with my gaze.

It’s almost as if their attitudes were tormenting me that I instinctively averted my face.

“Why are you guys here…?”

The question that escaped my lips was answered by Hayama.

“I called them here.”

Not only did I stare at him in wonder, but also Orimoto and her friend. As far as those two were concerned, they probably didn’t even understand what was going on. Hayama’s words were harsh and on top of that, people they didn’t know showed up. And the one who called those people was Hayama himself.

As we stiffened up in this confusion, Hayama turned to Orimoto and her friend and continued.

“Hikigaya isn’t the kind of guy you make him out to be.”

The smile on Hayama’s face had already disappeared. His voice sounded distinctly hostile. Orimoto and her friend grew petrified in place as they were given a sharp glare.

“He gets along fine with those two girls who are much, much more wonderful than you two could ever be. Could you please stop running your mouth only on what you can see?”

In the direction Hayama was pointing out were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Orimoto and her friend looked their way. And then, a groaning sigh could be heard.

Their voices wouldn’t come out. The reason was because they were disillusioned with the man called Hayama Hayato or because they feared him and at the same time confused.

As they wondered how they were supposed to answer, a silence emerged.

Except for one person.

Was it my imagination that I could hear a sneer in the direction of the seats at the counter on the smoker side?

Eventually, Orimoto made a deep sigh.

“Sorry, I’ll be going home.”

When she said that, she grabbed her bag. Nakamachi followed her in a panic.

“Y-Yeah. Sorry, me too…”

The two stood up and headed for the stairs down to the first floor. Halfway through when Orimoto was just about to pass by Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, she stopped for a moment. She looked at them both with a glance.

Yukinoshita continued to stare at me and Hayama as if someone like Orimoto wasn’t someone worthy of consideration in her line of sight while Yuigahama uncomfortably looked away because of the awkwardness of being stared at.

“So that’s how it is.”

Orimoto murmured, looking convinced and continued walking. When Nakamachi began climbing down the stairs, she turned around once and looked at Hayama. But, even so, she faced back down the stairs and descended quietly.

When Orimoto and Nakamachi disappeared, Yukinoshita let out a small sigh. She then gently spoke.

“I was told we were having a meeting regarding the election.”

As she said that, Yukinoshita sent Hayama a sharp glare. The glint in her eyes directed blame at Hayama more so than words could. Hayama couldn’t think of how to answer and looked away.

“By election, do you mean the student council?”

When I asked, Yukinoshita ignored my question and Hayama nodded feebly. Yuigahama, however, tried to smooth it over while stuttering in the process.

“U-Um, you see, Yukinon and I talked about how maybe we could try to get Hayato to come out for the election, so that’s why today, we were going to talk to him about it, and, and…”

She rapidly spoke on and on, but at the very end, she lost her words.

As expected, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama planned to nominate Hayama as the candidate. That decision itself wasn’t all that mysterious. You could even say it was correct. But it was odd for Hayama to actually accept it. Regardless of how much of a “can’t refuse someone if they asked for help” personality he had, Hayama was in a club. On top of that, he was the club president. If he was half-hearted about either one, he’d cause trouble for both. Hayama should’ve been well aware of that. So there was no way he’d be able to accept the offer so easily.

As I stood there not understanding what Hayama’s real intent was, I looked at Hayama. When I did, Hayama who took on my glare responded in a weak voice.

“I just wanted to do whatever I could.”

The one who reacted to those words wasn’t me.

“Hmmm, I see, I see.”

The woman who had been sitting at the seats for smokers in the corner the entire time stood up. She took off her hat and walked up to us.

“Nee-san…”

When Haruno appeared, for the first time, Yukinoshita was trembling. She probably wasn’t expecting to meet her in a place like this. When Haruno saw this, a malicious smile formed on her face.

“So, Yukino, you’re not going to run for student council president, huh? I was totally under the impression you were going to.”

She took one step after another, closing the distance between her and Yukinoshita before eventually standing in front of her. Yukinoshita bit her lips and softly casted down her eyes.

But even if she averted her gaze, she couldn’t keep her ears from listening.

“You’re exactly like mom in the way you push someone to do things for you.”

Those words were words Yukinoshita couldn't respond to and all she could do was strongly clench her fist. Haruno moved her face closer to Yukinoshita and softly rubbed her nape.

"Well, I guess that suits Yukino-chan just fine, though. After all, it's fine if you don't do anything. I mean, someone's always going to do it for you, right?"

She traced her long, supple fingers smoothly across her pale nape. She continued on as if she was tearing out her arteries and as if she was gradually strangling her neck.

When her fingers reached her throat, Yukinoshita brushed off Haruno's arms.

For several seconds, Yukinoshita and Haruno stood off against each other. No one was allowed to come in between them.

"I see, so that's what this is about…"

Yukinoshita murmured and then shot a glare at Hayama. Hayama made a deep sigh and closed his eyes while Haruno fearlessly smiled.

Yukinoshita adjusted her bag on her shoulders and turned around.

"If there's nothing else, I'll be leaving…"

She turned half her body to say that and began walking.

The frozen time slowly shifted into motion once again. Once we were able to breathe again, Yuigahama came back to her senses and chased after Yukinoshita.

"W-Wait, Yukinon!"

When the sound of hurried footsteps disappeared down into the stairs, the only ones left were me, Hayama, and Haruno.

"Just why would you say things like that to Yukinoshita?"

When I asked, Haruno's cruel smile she had the entire time disappeared and she let out a small sigh.

"Do you really have to ask? It's just the usual."

"You're going a little overboard if you're just trying to meddle with her."

Up until now, Haruno had always meddled with Yukinoshita in some way. But today, there was clearly a difference. Those supposed words of provocation had a hint of lukewarm aggression. Curious about the reason, I decided to ask, but Haruno tilted her head in a sweet fashion and played dumb.

"You think so?"

Brothers and sisters were, no, it was exactly because they were brothers and sisters that there were things that just wouldn't work well together. It was especially even more apparent when these two sisters were continuously compared for their excellence. That's why, it was reasonable to see why Yukinoshita would think a particular way towards her older sister. At the same time, Haruno was also

subjected to this comparison. Then from just that alone, it wouldn't be odd to think Haruno thought the same way towards her younger sister.

"Yes. Well, I happen to have a little sister myself, so I can easily tell if there's 'something' going on between fellow siblings."

That's why I could say this with confidence.

But when Haruno heard that, she smiled. It was completely different from the smile at the donuts shop. There was absolutely no trace of that calm demeanor of hers back then.

"You seem to understand everything, don't you, Hikigaya-kun?"

Those words that dripped with sarcasm felt like it was sneering at the depths of my shallowness. Simultaneously, there was this rejecting sharpness that barred all outsiders.

The pressure that was exerted from this hidden smile gave me goose bumps.

"…"

Looking at my attitude, Haruno's eyes narrowed. Her stare was different from earlier and was much kinder. The tone of her voice also brightened.

"Oh, don't give me that scary look. I'm honestly really impressed."

"Thanks for that…"

I rubbed my clothes at the area where the goose bumps were as I answered.

Haruno whose gaze was directed at me was surprisingly soft.

"You really are something else. How you try to look beyond what a person says and what a person does is something I'm really quite fond of, you know."

My words got trapped in my throat when she gave me those sudden words and with a smile, Haruno added more.

"Things that shrink back from something malicious really are cute."

In that sadistic expression of hers wasn't the slightest hint of love or anything of the sort. It was a lot simpler. They were eyes that looked like they were watching a pet. That gaze then shifted over to my side.

"People who can just handle everything flawlessly just aren't fun, right?"

Silent the entire time, Hayama let out a sigh that sounded like he was coughing. It didn't need to be asked as to who she was referring to; I knew.

As me and Hayama stood there without answering, Haruno slightly shrugged her shoulders.

She then grabbed her belongings that were left at her seat.

"Anyway, I've figured out what was bugging me, so I guess I'm gonna head home. I'm kinda tired of this, anyway."

She parted with just those words without turning back and quickly headed for the stairs. The way she left so skillfully was very typical of a free person like her; it didn't look like anyone could tie her down.

Just a slight hint of Haruno's perfume lingered.

It was just me and Hayama left.

I wanted to hurry up and put an end to this sour moment and reached for my bag.

But there were just a few words in my mouth.

These few words came out even though I tried to hold it in.

"…Quit trying to interfere with your needless concern."

I probably wasn't angry at what Hayama did in its entirety, but the fact that I couldn't stomach letting Yukinoshita and Yuigahama see me together with this group with Orimoto and her friend.

A part of me already understood that, yet I still couldn't help but become irritated.

Hayama made a self-deprecated laugh and relaxed his shoulders. When he did that, the Hayama whom I thought was overbearing looked tiny.

"Sorry. That wasn't my intention… I just did something I wanted to do."

"You mean… what happened with Orimoto earlier?"

That wasn't something I expected from the Hayama normally. That also applied to that cruel smile that Yukinoshita Haruno had. Even though she was so pretty and bright, there was just something shallow somewhere in that smile of hers.

I was aware that his actions were just to protect me. Even so, I just couldn't comprehend why Hayama would go as far as destroying his own image to do that.

"…Are you really okay with what you did to them earlier?"

"…I feel terrible for doing it. I don't want to do it ever again."

Hayama bit his lips and I spat out.

"Then don't bother in the first place."

Really, what a joke. I just didn't understand what these nice guys were thinking about. Because they were so in love with everyone getting along, they ended up opening up other problems when they try to fix one. I didn't even ask to be thrown into that circle either.

Hayama fell back onto the chair. And then he looked at me, suggesting me to sit down. I declined that offer and waited for his words while standing.

When I did, Hayama sighed thinking not much he could do and leaned forward while crossing his fingers.

"…I've always been thinking. About a way to take back the things that I destroyed."

"Huh?"

I didn't know what Hayama was getting at.

But based on his ambiguous way of speaking, basically, he wanted to avoid referring to something, and I guessed at what he was actually talking about.

"I… had expectations of you. Even though I understood you, I asked you for help anyway. Because of that…"

"Hey."

Don't you dare say anything more.

The voice I used to stop him sounded more violent than normal. I wasn't in the mood to be touching upon what he was talking about anymore. The things that should have been settled and ended were about to be dug from their grave from what Hayama was about to say.

Hayama looked like he didn't want to touch on that either and momentarily cut off his words. He then threw it out which followed into his conclusion.

"You need to understand your own worth more… And it's not just you, but the people around you, too."

"What are you saying…? Huh?"

His surprising words caused me to stutter.

"But it's just so difficult, so… I mean, there should've been a better way to do it… This was really the only thing I could do."

Hayama said those self-deprecating words and made a bitter smile. But when that smile disappeared, he looked at me with extremely sad eyes.

"…This is how you did things up until now, right? Can't you just stop making a victim out of yourself now?"

"…Don't lump me together with you."

What was locked in my throat came out with my breath. My voice quietly reverberated in the store. Mixed in my voice was irritation, rage, and then a small amount of grief that I only just noticed.

—-Ahh, how incredibly irritating. What a terrible mix of feelings.

Even though you were just standing by, even though you came this close. Why were you going over there?

I'm sure I was just expecting the truth. Maybe Hayama might have actually understood.

But that was wrong.

Don’t look down on me and sympathize with me. Don’t pity me.

Hayama was misunderstanding. I pitied Hayama so I lent him a hand. But it made no sense for Hayama to pity me.

A lump of undefinable emotions came out on its own from my mouth.

“Victim? Don’t screw with me. It’s completely normal to me.”

Hayama listened silently to the words I shot at him. He stood there just looking like he was impressed. That made me even more irritated.

“After all, it’s because I’m always alone. If there’s something that needs to be solved, the only one who can do that is me. Isn’t it obvious that I should be the one who does it then?”

The only one in my world was just me alone. Whenever I confronted whatever I could, the only one there was just me alone.

“Whatever my surroundings think, they don’t have a damn thing to do with anything. The things that happen right before my eyes are always only the things that I can do. Don’t misunderstand and stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

The world was my ego.

If I chose to do something and it failed, then that was fine. However, if some outsider tried to take that result and make it his own, then that was completely different.

They were usurpers who tried to act like a savior.

I glared at Hayama and he returned the glare back.

At some point, Hayama, who probably hadn’t noticed himself, was clenching his fists. He suddenly loosened his grip and casted his eyes downward.

“Don’t you help people… because you want someone to help you?”isn’t it because you’re wishing for someone to help you?”

That settled it.

I knew it, but this guy really didn’t understand at all.

It was as though he only interpreted all my actions as something I did only after I selfishly considered things.

But let’s say there was a chance that was the case for Hikigaya Hachiman.

He wouldn’t let someone like him of all people to be the one to say that.

That sham of an emotion was something that I and she didn’t have in what we did up until now.

“Wrong.”

I stopped bothering with glaring at him.

I didn’t ask for that superficial kindness and pity. This adolescent drama with the template asking for tears was so disgusting it made me want to vomit.

In this drama, no matter how it was structured, there would always be a loser and that was an unavoidable fact. Then there was the possibility that there would be times where I was the loser. Even the Hayama in front may have to become a loser too.

This was a zero-sum game. If someone were to get the good end of the stick, then someone would get the bad end. There was nothing more than that. Even if you glorified your youth, just one mistake could completely turn it over.

But even so, all of you guys should stop labeling things while you look down on them.

Don’t show your sympathy, don’t show your pity. Because that was nothing more than comforting yourself.

I snatched the bag that I left alone.

“Don’t force your disgusting sympathy on me and pity me. Labeling me like that is nothing but trouble.”

I spat out those words, turned my back, and descended down the stairs.

I left the store with a speed faster than usual and I didn’t stop until I made it close to the station. It wasn’t like anyone was chasing after me, but I continued to keep moving.

When I made it to the parking area where I left my bike, I finally stopped.

I looked up to the sky and numerous stars glittered.

Numerous bikes fell over possibly because of the cold, blowing wind. The bike that was at the very bottom of the heap was mine. As I pulled up each bike one by one, words left my lips.

“…Don’t screw with me.”

Who were those words aimed at?

I won’t let anyone call it self-sacrifice.

I won’t let anyone call those who picked to the best of their ability the choice that was most effective amongst their limited choices a victim. It was a disgrace that surpassed everything. It was blasphemy against those who desperately tried to live.

Why the hell would I become a victim for the lot of you?

It may not be something tangible, audible, or describable in words.

But I certainly had a conviction.

It was the one thing that I shared with someone, and the one that I lost.

Chapter 6

And so, **Yuigahama Yui** makes a declaration.

Spending the weekends idly wasn't a rare occurrence, but these two days were worse than usual.

I would sleep like a log until noon, eat lunch, laze about on the sofa and take an afternoon nap after getting sleepy, and when I woke up, it would already be evening. I would then have some dinner and lethargically waste time until I got sleepy again and then I would fall asleep.

This routine repeated itself over the course of the past two days and now, my weekend was over.

The taste of medicine still lingered in my mouth. It was a bitter and grainy discomfort that wouldn't disappear.

That didn't change even when it became Monday. If anything, it felt much gloomier than usual.

It was a cloudy morning and the bike lane that ran up towards school was submerged in a cold wind and the pedals of my bike were heavy.

When I made it onto campus, it was my feet that felt heavy this time and the uncomfortable chilly wind that found its way through small crevices at my feet bothered me.

But the people present in the class made it feel warm.

Even so, was it because of the weather that the room felt gloomier than usual? Even though it was the usual gathered students in the class, it just wasn't as lively.

The main cause behind that was likely lodged in the heart of the class.

In the back of the class were voices that sounded more subdued than usual.

Even the usually ostentatiously loud Tobe was restraining his voice as if he was being considerate.

"Hayato-kun, what ya gonna do about club?"

"Let's see. I guess we should get there early."

Hayama's tone was unchanging as always. But the brevity of his words naturally infected the world around him.

"Oh right, the soccer club had the day off, huh?"

When Oooka casually spoke up, Yamato responded. The fields were shared by the sports clubs. Those two had a mutual understanding of that fact.

Somewhere in their exchange bothered Miura as she repeatedly uttered a single word.

"…Friday."

Those soulless utterances of hers sounded incoherent. Suddenly noticing the mood, Ebina slammed onto her desk and stood up noisily.

"Yu-Yumiko! Oh no! Friday and today sound so similar, I'm not sure which one is the top and which one is the bottom[1]!"

"Friday…"

This time it was Yuigahama who murmured.

"O-Okay! Yui thinks Friday's the top! How about you, Tobbechi!?"

When the conversation flung in Tobe's direction, he was dumbfounded.

"Eh, uh, Friday is… ah."

But looking as if he had a breakthrough, he hastily stood up noisily, knocking his chair down in the process.

"D-Darn straight, that's gotta mean today! Today's the only day where we just gotta go, go and go!"

"Y-Yeah! I-I think so too!"

Tobe and Ebina pulled in Oooka and Yamato for a high five.

"Woooo!"

"Yaaaay!"

The two panted after the exchange had ended. But, Hayama continued to smile gently while Miura and Yuigahama continued making small sighs.

…That's some painful effort they're putting in.

But if they didn't do that, then there'd be problems.

That's because they were the ones who wished for that kind of relationship the most.

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Time continued to tick by as I sat through my first and second period classes.

The third period ended smoothly and it was now fourth period.

Once this was over, it was lunch break. It's likely that the atmosphere of the class would become like it was in the morning. It really didn't matter all that much to me since I usually didn't eat my lunch in class, but amongst all the classes in school, this class was the liveliest. So just how was this class that was now submerged in gloom perceived by others?

But unexpectedly, they probably wouldn't notice anything. Even the teachers in charge of the classes today weren't aware of anything out of place.

Fourth period was modern Japanese.

As the chimes rang, Hiratsuka-sensei entered the room. Upon entering, she surveyed the room and tilted her head.

"…Hm. You guys sure are quiet today. Well, that's fine. Let's begin class."

As expected, she's quite observant.

Hiratsuka-sensei specified a page from the textbook and began reading something from the book while writing it on the blackboard.

I rested my chin on my hands and opened my textbook.

I mechanically rotated my eyes between the textbook, blackboard, and notes. But, no matter how much I looked, I couldn't make any sense of any of the words.

Class continued with nothing being absorbed.

It felt like that the entire day.

A cycle of questions that couldn't be answered repeated itself.

My sudden recollection of things had me thinking of wandering, passing thoughts.

When Orimoto looked at those two at the end, what was she thinking?

She might've done something awful to Nakamachi.

What was Isshiki going to ask? Also, I needed to do something about her election.

Aah, I wonder if I needed to make a status report to Meguri.

As for Miura, I could leave it up to Ebina to smooth it over. Tobe could also lend a hand in doing that. Surprisingly, that just might be the trigger that could get them together.

Should I have brought home a chocolate croissant yesterday for Komachi? As usual, I still hadn't heard anything from her.

And finally, what was Haruno really thinking? I didn't really understand the relationship between those two sisters. Even now, I still hadn't gotten any closer to them.

Hayama didn't look like his usual, outgoing self, but he was still able to smile. What a guy. Maybe he was actually never hurt in the first place? If so, then the guy was a real masterpiece. If I was the only one needlessly worrying about every little thing, the way I was acting so absurdly self-conscious made me want to vomit.

—Above all else, what were those two thinking right now?

At some point, the hand scribbling on the blackboard had stopped.

Noticing that, I lifted my head in surprise and my eyes clashed with Hiratsuka-sensei's at the platform.

“Hikigaya.”

“Y-Yes?”

I jolted from having my name called abruptly. Hiratsuka-sensei then let out a deep sigh.

“Make your way to the faculty office after this.”

She uttered only those words, descended from the platform, and left the classroom.

What about class…? Or so I thought, but when I looked around, everyone had already put away their textbooks and notes. They proceeded to move their tables and take out their lunchboxes.

While I was watching in a daze, the chimes had already rung.

I put my class supplies together and stood up from my seat.

“Make your way to the faculty office.” So that meant I was to meet with her this lunch break. Let’s take care of business before eating lunch. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have any time to eat my food.

I left the classroom into the hallway in a hurry and slightly ahead was Hiratsuka-sensei leisurely walking. I followed after her to the faculty office.

Even though we were within speaking distance, Hiratsuka-sensei didn’t say anything. Her back was simply saying “just be quiet and follow me”.

Once we made it into the faculty office, Hiratsuka-sensei finally spoke.

“Shall we go further inside?”

Further in was a reception room established inside the faculty’s office.

It was partitioned off and inside was a glass tabletop and black leather sofas. I was taken in here before.

“Have a seat over there.”

She pointed to the sofa and I sat.

Hiratsuka-san took a seat slightly to the right on the opposite sofa, sitting in a position diagonally from facing me head on.

She then took out a cigarette and lighted it.

Hiratsuka-san pushed a glass ashtray from the side onto the top of the table and nodded.

She took two to three puffs and dropped the ashes.

“It looked like you weren’t paying attention at all in class today.”

“Haa. Well, today wasn’t that much so it’s rather easy to understand.”

When I said that, Hiratsuka-san had a slightly displeased expression.

“It’s because only your test scores are good that it’s a problem.”

With a discontented puff of smoke, Hiratsuka-san paused for a moment and began to speak.

“…I heard what happened from Yukinoshita this morning.”

She went through the trouble of calling me out. Then it must have been something important. I straightened my back and focused my ears.

Hiratsuka-san tapped the ashes of the cigarette into the tray again.

“It looks like she’s going to run for the student council president.”

“Who is?”

“Yukinoshita herself.”

When I asked, Hiratsuka-sensei answered instantly.

Upon hearing it, my heart grew noisy.

Yukinoshita was going to run for the student council president.

The question of why she was doing it filled my head. Yukinoshita didn’t like standing out in public. She even said it herself. Not to mention during the culture festival when they tried to push her to be the committee chairman, she obstinately declined. Above all else, there was also the Service Club.

Did Haruno-san’s provocations cause Yukinoshita to act? Was the ongoing war-like discord between the two sisters something that wouldn’t so easily disappear?

As I fell into thought, Hiratsuka-sensei added.

“Hayama is apparently doing the campaign speech for her.”

“Is that so…”

Hayama, huh…

True enough, when it came to the campaign speech, he was the most suitable choice. But that was only if they were completely unrelated. I didn’t know the details behind Hayama and Yukinoshita’s past. I’ve been doing everything up until now without ever knowing. However, based on how Yukinoshita typically acted, I felt it didn’t fall in line with her principles.

During the weekend, Yukinoshita decided to run for candidacy, contacted Hayama, and got his consent to do the speech for her, huh? I couldn’t get a clear image of what her motive and intent was, but the preparations alone were quite good. From that alone, I could say it was very typical of Yukinoshita.

When Hiratsuka-sensei crushed her cigarette, she softly looked up.

“Hikigaya, what will you do?”

“I won’t do anything. I can’t really be picky about their plans.”

Besides, if you thought about it normally, then Yukinoshita becoming the president would settle everything. There wouldn't be a need to look for other possible nominees for candidacy. There just wasn't anything problematic that I could see.

I was gritting my teeth, not having realized it.

"…Given her qualifications, she's the most apt person for the job."

If anything, why didn't that possibility ever come up in my mind? It's because I unconsciously filtered it out.

That scenery and that period of time could easily collapse on itself at any time for whatever reason and I was supposed to have been aware of that.

Hiratsuka-sensei nodded to my mutter.

"I suppose so… There's no one more suitable. I imagine once everyone and all the teachers knew, they'd welcome it with open arms."

That was certain. The teachers probably weren't the only ones. Even Meguri-senpai would be relieved with it. If they knew, then the election wouldn't be necessary. It was the same as winning the majority.

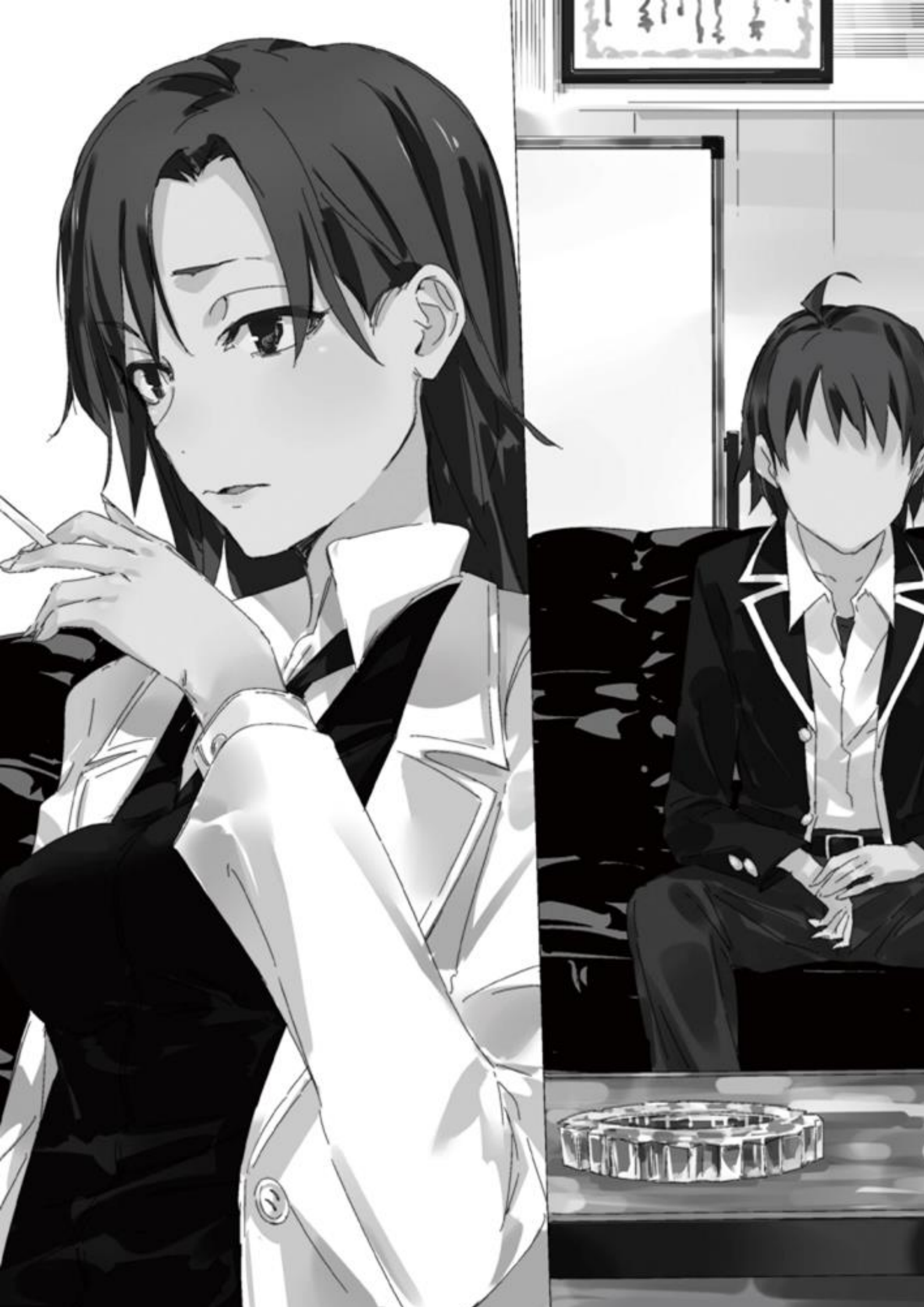
"You haven't told anyone about it, yet?"

"Yes."

Hiratsuka-sensei made a sweet smile and lit up another cigarette. She puffed out a smoke energetically and pointed at me.

"Well then, I'll ask again. Hikigaya, what will you do?"

When she asked me, my thoughts were slower than my response of rejection.



I couldn't approve of Yukinoshita running for the student council president.

That's why, regardless of what reasoning was presented, that was just an addendum. However, eventually, she'd try to rationalize it. And I knew that Yukinoshita's way of doing things like that was wrong. In the end, if Yukinoshita tried to carry this burden herself, then that was no different from the culture festival.

That way of doing things was something that I've already rejected.

In that case, this time would follow the same conclusion.

"…Hiratsuka-sensei, do you have the key to the room?"

When I asked, Hiratsuka-sensei made a dangling gesture with her hand.

"As always, Yukinoshita has been using the room during lunch break."

Then that meant Yukinoshita was still eating lunch in the room.

If she becomes a candidate for the student council at this rate, then it wouldn't be possible to withdraw. Whether I'll stop it or not was something I'll leave for after talking to her.

When I stood up, Hiratsuka-sensei looked outside the window and puffed.

"Even though the club became voluntary, she always came to get the key every day."

"…I see. Please excuse me."

I bowed and Hiratsuka-sensei raised her hand without looking at me. As usual, the smoke continued to ascend up.

I left the faculty office hastily and headed directly for the club room.

I went through the stairs of the special building and then the hallway. There wasn't a sign of anyone passing through this hallway. Because of that, all I could see before me was an awfully, dreadful view. However, the temperature didn't catch my attention as I moved forward quickly.

I placed my hands on the door of the room and immediately opened it.

In the room were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Both of them had small lunchboxes scattered about.

Yuigahama stared at me fixedly because I suddenly barged into the room. But Yukinoshita stared at me with the same cold gaze from the other day and said nothing.

"Yukinoshita, are you planning to run for president yourself?"

"…Yes."

When I asked her, Yukinoshita answered with a very concise response. She then gently shifted her eyes downwards.

“Eh?”

Only Yuigahama had a surprised expression as she stared.

“She didn’t tell you?”

“Y-Yeah…”

Yuigahama’s shoulders shrunk and as she looked down, she answered. Yukinoshita showed Yuigahama an apologetic expression.

“…I was planning on discussing it with her.”

But when Yukinoshita said that, she averted her gaze from Yuigahama.

“That’s not called discussing, since you already decided on it.”

Yukinoshita decided by herself and moved by herself. It was probably true she was going to discuss it. No, she may have planned to discuss it a while back. Putting aside whether she really would have talked about it then.

“Is it… because of what your sister said to you?”

Yesterday came to mind when I asked. But Yukinoshita answered without looking my way.

“She has nothing to do with it. I don’t take anything she says seriously. I’m doing this because I want to.”

I really just didn’t understand. The more I touched upon the relationship of the Yukinoshita sisters, the less I understood about them. But I didn’t think for a second that touching on that would change Yukinoshita’s answer in any way.

Then I needed to talk about something else.

“Weren’t you going to support Hayama?”

“He already has his hands full with his own club. There isn’t anyone else suitable for the task besides him, is there?”

Yukinoshita looked at her hands she placed on the table and answered. Listening to that, Yuigahama timidly spoke up.

“But Yukinon, you have club, too…”

Those words that were spoken in a groping, shy fashion caused Yukinoshita to raise her head and smile at Yuigahama.

“It won’t be a problem. This club isn’t as busy as the Soccer Club and I’m well aware of what the Student Council work entails. It won’t add any extra burden to our club.”

So stated Yukinoshita, but how much of that was really true?

Activities of both the student council and the club; there were people who were doing both now. If you took into account Yukinoshita’s ability, then she was probably also capable of it as well. But even the culture festival and the athletics

festival brought up a lot of issues indicating that you wouldn't know unless you tried.

I could understand why they couldn't support Hayama. Even amongst the sports clubs, the soccer club was the most prominent. As the club president, he probably couldn't be missing practice very often either. That would be the reason for why he couldn't participate in the activities of the student council. That's why at the very beginning, I crossed off Hayama as a potential candidate.

But still, that wasn't reason enough for why Yukinoshita would become a candidate.

"What's the possibility of another candidate besides Hayama?"

"I believe you were the one who rejected that possibility."

Yukinoshita answered immediately with a cold tone.

Indeed, given the limited time, it would be difficult to find a person with the qualities befitting of the student council president, persuade him, and get him to win the election. And the one who pointed that out was none other than me.

To think that my impulsive nature that would take over when criticizing someone would backfire on me. I scratched my head reflexively as a result.

"Is that why you're doing this?"

Because I could only answer with so little words, my tone sounded violent. Yuigahama's shoulders shook for a moment.

However, Yukinoshita calmly, no, cruelly enumerated her cold words.

"Objectively thinking, this would be the best option. I can win against Isshiki-san without a problem. And doing this alone means I won't need to come to an agreement with anyone else. The other student council members are already motivated, so we should be able to hold our school events much more smoothly and effectively than before… Also, I don't mind doing it."

After Yukinoshita finished, she breathed out.

She looked downwards in a way that stopped the conversation. And in that expression of hers seemed to be a mix of an extreme sadness and a tragic determination.

"Effectively", huh?

That word awfully struck a chord with me. She wasn't the only one who sought for efficiency. He, who would act with that as his reason, was someone similar.

That's exactly why, if it had to be an effective way of doing things, then there were other ways to do it.

"Maybe, but we still have another option where we don't need to resort to an election battle."

When I said that, Yukinoshita raised her head.

“Are you talking about your idea from before?”

Yukinoshita questioned me with a sharp look in her eyes. It was those eyes again.

But I wasn’t planning on backing off now. So I returned her stare.

“Yeah.”

There was no absolute confidence in my plan. Even so, in the group of distributed hands was a single one that was the most plausible. I planned to deal out that hand that was the most effective of them all.

It was already lighting up in the palms of my hands.

Yukinoshita sighed and in just that instant, she averted her gaze from me.

She then glared at me. I felt a pressure that resembled the feelings of hostility.

“You overestimate yourself far too much if you think your words and your behavior alone are enough to influence the entire student body. I don’t think those alone will solve the problem.”

She struck where it hurts.

It was as Yukinoshita said. I wasn’t a person with that much influence. I was quite aware of that. If the committee was a small community, then I could at least stir up some trouble.

However, if you weren’t known, no one would support you and you would have no way of getting ahead. Even if you considered the unspecified number of students who weren’t like the average student, as far as results were concerned, honestly speaking, they were an unknown number. Even if I was hated, it was doubtful whether everyone would actually remember me. I didn’t have any confidence I could leave an impression that would last in their memories. Besides, there was also the possibility that their thoughts could shift to Isshiki.

But in that case, all that’s need was to reexamine the prerequisites carefully and give a performance that exceeded the estimated result.

“Then I’ll just have to think of something else that takes that into account.”

If cowardice and spite wasn’t enough, then we just needed to delve into ill will and malice. If it’s to build disgust and hatred, then there were numerous ways to do it.

People didn’t demand a reason to hate another. Whatever reason it may be, “he kinda pisses me off”, “he’s kinda unlikeable”, “he’s kinda gross”, it would become a reason for hating someone.

My mouth distorted into a wretched smile. It turned into one on its own unintentionally. With my expression like that, I looked back at Yukinoshita.

Seeing that, Yukinoshita firmly bit her lips and looked away from me.

“…If you believe everyone cares about you enough to hate you, you are far too self-conscious.”

Just those few words hurt more than any logic ever could.

The monster of self-consciousness that was shut away in the labyrinth crawled further in.

There wasn’t one rebuttal I could muster against Yukinoshita.

When the conversation abruptly ended, the quiet clattering of the window by the wind echoed in the silent room. The blowing north wind chilled the room.

“…My methods are different from yours.”

As she faced downwards, her tightly gripped fist and slender shoulders shivered from the cold. They were words that quietly slipped out. Those words alone were something I could agree with.

“I guess so…”

They really were different. It wasn’t an issue between the principles of being right or wrong, but between our motivations. That difference was what defined our current distance between each other.

In that time, Yuigahama was listening to our conversation silently. And she was probably thinking the entire time. She muttered as if she was in body, but not in spirit.

“I see… So, Yukinon’s going to do that…”

Yuigahama didn’t say anything else.

When I felt the time steadily coagulate, Yukinoshita glanced at me.

“Is there anything else?”

“…No, that’s all I wanted to ask you.”

I didn’t know what I wanted to confirm. That time when I rejected Yukinoshita’s way of doing things was different from the circumstances now. In that case, I couldn’t so easily reject it this time. I didn’t think it was the best method, but I could only be convinced that it was the second alternative.

“…I see.”

She voiced something that was either a reply or a sigh and began to gather up her small lunchbox that still had quite a lot left.

I turned around and left the room.

The sound of the door closing behind me reverberated in the soundless room.

I walked down the hallway of the special building. Compared to before I came through here, it wasn’t worthy of comparison. Further ahead was Hayama. When Hayama noticed me, he slightly raised his hand.

“So you came too.”

He sure was something to be in the mood for talking. Just when I thought he was going to speak his mind, here he is, having a perfectly fine expression. I couldn’t understand how he could keep those two separate. Or could it be that he possessed the same qualities similar to Haruno?

“…”

Not in the mood to start up a conversation, I sent Hayama a look asking why he was here to which he shrugged his shoulders.

“I was just called out to meet with them.”

“That so.”

I replied with just those words and walked past Hayama.

Just as we passed by each other, Hayama spoke.

“I’ll be working with Yukinoshita… What are you going to do?”

“…I’m not going to do anything.”

I spat out those words and continued down the hallway without looking back. It sounded like I could hear a sigh from behind me.

If anything, it was likely more correct that I wasn’t going to do anything, but that I couldn’t do anything.

Rebuttals that could go against Yukinoshita wouldn’t come to mind. Her words were much more logical.

In the first place, I wasn’t sure if opposing her was a good thing.

There was no reason for that.

Should Yukinoshita run as a candidate in the election, then she would no doubt be the strongest contender and it was pretty much clear who was going to be elected. Not only was her ability the real deal, there was also Hayama who was cooperating with her.

As I walked senselessly back to the classroom, I realized that I had forgotten to eat my lunch.

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Because of my hunger, I absorbed absolutely nothing from my afternoon classes. It was also doubtful anything even reached my ears.

I kept myself facing towards the front the entire time during class. Because if I turned around, Yuigahama and Hayama would come into view and bothersome things would start filling my head again.

I abandoned all thought regarding class and went through continuous repetitions between dozing off and pretending to sleep.

I went through fifth and sixth period in the same fashion and it was finally homeroom.

For these types of days, the best thing was to hurry up and go straight home.

After the announcements from the homeroom teacher, we were finally free.

The clamoring noise afterschool felt like it belonged to another world. I got ready to go home without contributing to that noise and stood up from my seat.

After I entered the hallway and started heading in the direction of the front entrance, a voice called out to me from behind.

"W-Wait up!"

When I turned around, Yuigahama ran up to me. Yuigahama looked flustered as she steadied her breathing and slowly spoke.

"Um… do you want to go home together?"

"I brought my bike. Also, our houses are in different directions."

I blurted out what was the most natural thing in the world and said nothing more. I answered emotionlessly. But, Yuigahama didn't back down.

"Yeah. That's why… just up to there."

As she said that, Yuigahama pointed in some unknown direction.

Aah, I understood Yuigahama's expression was telling me that she wouldn't withdraw here.

Well, going in the direction of Yuigahama's house was just a slight detour. I could still get home. It's not like I had anything to do even if I went straight home.

Besides, I mostly knew what Yuigahama wanted to talk about. It was the same for me after all.

"…I'll go get my bike so wait here."

I pointed to the side of the gate as I said that and began walking.

"Ah, I'll go too."

After saying that, Yuigahama followed me from behind.

"Nah, that's fine."

I stopped her there and I headed to the bike parking area quickly. For the two of us to go to the bike area side by side given the amount of people still at school was embarrassing. Not to mention, Yuigahama would stand out. Even more so since she didn't commute to school with a bike and there was no reason for her to be there. I also knew that she was popular with the guys. I felt being seen here wouldn't be a good thing.

I hastily unlocked my bike and headed for the side gate.

Yuigahama earnestly waited at the side gate and when she noticed me, she raised her hand. Like I said, doing things like that made you stand out.

I pushed my bike with Yuigahama standing next to me. I nodded to her indicating that we should get going. Yuigahama nodded in response and we began walking.

The direction of Yuigahama's head was still fresh in my head.

It should've been a few minutes from the station to get to her apartment complex. Going by bike or even by bus was probably the fastest way to get there, but perhaps the bus stop out front may just have been as well. Yuigahama typically commuted to school by bus.

We first decided to use the street side to pass through the park near by the school and headed for the station.

The leaves of the trees in the park had stopped falling and there were no signs of children playing either.

On that path were scattered and staggered students going home. Those students also included us.

I stayed quiet as I pushed my bike and Yuigahama walked along quietly as well.

We both seemed to be looking for the timing to start up a conversation.

As the uneasy silence continued, we turned away from the curving street that ran up along the apartment complexes. The shadows of the complexes retracted and the raining sunlight filled the area.

Along the faint sunlight blew the north wind. That chilliness struck our bodies.

Suddenly, Yuigahama spoke up.

"Say, Yukinon's going to run in the election, huh?"

"Yeah."

Right now, what was bothering us was exactly that. Even Yuigahama wasn't told the reason for Yukinoshita's decision to run for presidency. What was she thinking and what was it that we wanted to do?

All I thought was how we were going to talk about that.

But Yuigahama said something completely different.

"…I will too. I think I'll give it a try too."

"Huh?"

I turned to her and asked her what she was blurting out all of a sudden.

But Yuigahama's mouth was tightly sealed shut and she was looking at her feet with a serious expression. That's why I thought about the context from earlier of what she had said.

“I’ll give it a try.” What she said didn’t sound anything like a joke and what she was saying was that she would run as a candidate for the student council president just like Yukinoshita.

“Why would you…”

I was under the assumption that Yuigahama wasn’t the type of person who would want to take on the role of student council president. Frankly, it just didn’t suit her character.

When I asked, Yuigahama kicked a stone near her feet. It bounced once before dropping into the gutter.

“You see, I don’t have anything. Things I want to do, things I can do, I don’t have any of them. That’s why, on the other hand, maybe something like that might actually work or something.”

When she finished speaking, she raised her head. She tried to play it off with a bashful smile as if she was embarrassed by saying something serious.

As I fumbled about what I should say, that smile of hers disappeared. Eventually, my voice finally came out.

“’On the other hand’ you say… Don’t just selfishly say something like that.”

“It’s not selfish.”

Yuigahama stopped. Because she was facing downwards, I couldn’t read her expression. But her aggravated declaration was sharp. This was the first time I’ve heard Yuigahama talk like that.

“It’s everyone that’s being selfish.”

Her voice wasn’t the least bit loud, but mixed in it was a calm anger.

Indeed, I had no right to say anything. That incident during the field trip was something I selfishly did myself. Of course, this time, Yukinoshita choosing to become a candidate was the same. We were only deciding things with our egos.

But that wasn’t enough of a reason for Yuigahama to become a candidate.

“Did you think it over?”

When I asked her, Yuigahama nodded with her expression still facing downwards.

“I did, and I thought this was the only way…”

Yuigahama spoke her words with a halting tone. She strongly squeezed the straps of her backpack with her uncovered hands.

“This time, we’ll be the ones trying our best. We realized that we’ve been leaving it up to Hikki to do everything up until now.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“Really…”

A fleeting smile formed on Yuigahama's face and she slightly tilted her head.

"Yes, really. That's why you don't need to put in all that effort."

That was the only thing I could say.

Really, well, at the very least, there wasn't one good thing I did. There wasn't one thing I did that was worth praising or evaluating. The only thing I did was flaunt my self-centered theories, that's all.

"That's not the only thing."

Yuigahama's gaze was directed towards the distant school.

"I'm sure if Yukinon becomes the president, she'll spend all her time on it. And then, she'll become the greatest president ever, much more than anyone else, and she'll even improve the school… But I think we'll lose the club because of that."

"We won't lose the club just because of that.."

I had no intentions of lying. The Service Club would still exist.

However, Yuigahama quietly shook her head. Her hair wasn't long at all yet the evening sun reflected her swaying hair.

"No, we will. You already know what Yukinon's like, Hikki. She always focuses all her attention on one thing just like what she did during the Cultural and Sports Festival."

"…"

I knew that very well. Whenever a request concerning a big event came up, we undoubtedly would give our full attention to it.

There was a limit to Yukinoshita's capacity. Of course, this capacity was far greater than the average person, but there was a limit. The job called the student council president had duties all year round and putting that into consideration, it would be difficult to continue the current Service Club's activities.

As I was in the middle of thinking, Yuigahama took a step forward ahead of me.

"You see."

The hems of Yuigahama's skirt fluttered as she quickly spun around. She joined her hands together behind her and suddenly stopped.

She then looked directly at me.

"…I love this club."

Just those few words were enough to tell me, "That's why I want to protect it."

“I really love… it.”

When Yuigahama repeated those words, tears slowly dripped from the corner of her eyes.

I instinctively lost my words when I saw that.

At times like this, what kind of words could I say? Unsuitable thoughts filled my head and worthwhile words wouldn’t come out.

As I stood there without saying anything, Yuigahama gasped in surprise and hastily rubbed her eyes with her sleeves. There, she showed a forced smile.

“W-Well, you know, um, even if I become the student president, I figured I could just do whatever and still keep the club the way it is now or something. I mean, it’s me after all. It’s not like anyone expects me to do a good job and stuff.”

“No, even so.”

Yuigahama stopped the words that came out.

Yuigahama took a step forward and placed her hand on my chest, telling me she wouldn’t let me say any more.

Right next to me was Yuigahama’s face. Her face that was facing downwards was hard to see. Unable to move away from her, I could only stand there stiffly.

Yuigahama gently raised her head.

“…That’s why I’ll beat Yukinon.”

Her eyes no longer dripped with tears and her gaze gave off a strong feeling of determination.

Just as I was about to open my mouth to say Yuigahama’s name, Yuigahama quickly took a step away from me.

She then glanced around, readjusted her backpack over her shoulders, and talked hurriedly.

“Oh, I’ll be fine here…! See you later!”

“Ah, yeah… See you later.”

I replied with a short acknowledgement to her back that quickly went away. Yuigahama turned around as if she heard it.

“Bye bye, Hikki.”

After she said that, Yuigahama slightly waved her hands.

As I stood there under the setting sun seeing the smiling Yuigahama off at a place where my hands couldn’t reach, the area where she touched tightened in pain.

When I lightly raised my hand, I pushed my bike and returned to the original street.

After making it on to the big street, I got on my bike.

As I pedaled, I began to think in earnest.

Yuigahama would become the student council president in order to protect the Service Club where she belonged.

Possibly, if someone was going to win against Yukinoshita, then it could be Yuigahama.

Yuigahama had the presence of being in the top caste of the school and she also had other connections which surpassed Yukinoshita. She held the possibility that could split the favorable votes that Hayama could muster. Even if Hayama's support made it around, how Miura and the others acted would be hard to predict.

Above all else, Yuigahama was a wonderful girl.

That's why there wouldn't be anything strange should Yuigahama become the student council president.

Yukinoshita Yukino and Yuigahama Yui.

It was likely that the outcome of the election would be between these two. Regardless of who loses, Isshiki Iroha would be able to save face.

There was nothing better than this as far as methods were concerned.

The accepted request from Isshiki would be settled.

But that was just the result.

But most likely, the club would be gone.

Despite what Yuigahama had said, she would probably fulfill her duties properly as the student council president. At first, she'd be able to smooth it over, but even so, she would eventually reach her limit.

Just from her looks alone, she was a diligent person and someone who looked out for others. There was no doubt she'd become the ideal student council president that the other members yearned for. And then, she'd be unable to betray them. As a result, she would properly tackle her duties as the student council president. At that point, it would be difficult for her to show her face at the club.

That's why the club would be gone.

Only the name of the club and the room itself would remain and it would turn into something completely different.

That was something I had realized before.

It wasn't just me, but also those two as well.

If it was a decision consented upon by both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, then I didn't mind. My personal sentiment wasn't something good enough that could influence a person's decision after all.

It's just that.

It’s just that. But even so.

It was painful to force a role onto someone.

In trying to protect what was dear to you, you’d end up losing what you wanted to achieve. Seeing someone like her going through that was something very painful.

Without something becoming the victim, the adolescent drama wouldn’t hold. Even though I knew that.

I wasn’t a victim so things like pity and compassion weren’t necessary. Even though I was the one who arrogantly said that.

What a cruel contradiction.

The sky was a mixture of the evening twilight and darkness of night while the cold wind pricked my fingertips. Unknowingly, my feet that pedaled the bike had stopped.

Chapter 7

It doesn’t need to be said that even **Hikigaya Komachi** can be kind.

Following the end of November, the nights became considerably colder.

Although that was supposed to be the case, I was drenched in sweat because halfway through on my way back, I pedaled my bike with all my might.

While breathing heavily, I entered the house.

I went directly to the bath as I was, threw off my uniform, and showered from head to toe.

The water that I set to hot painfully stung my chilled body.

No matter how much I rinsed, I was unable to wash away my mood, so I gave up and turned off the water.

The only thing reflected in the mirror was my drenched self. As always, I was making the same ridiculous, gloomy expression.

I left the bath, wiped down my body, and changed into my house clothes.

When I went upstairs to the living room, the only one there was my cat, Kamakura. He was sleeping in the meatloaf position on the cushions of the sofa.

Nothing was better than animal therapy when you were tired. I biked way too hard and with the outrageous amount of built up lactic acid, my fatigue was out of this world.

When I sat on the sofa, I turned Kamakura around, stretched him out, flicked his ears, squished his paws, and buried my face in his stomach. Crap, this was super fun.

Kamakura stared at me looking super irritated from being played around with. It was a look that implied nothing ,but “What’s with this punk, meow…?” You totally hated it eh? You’re a funny fellow.

“Hahaha… Haa…”

I noticed my laugh turned into a sigh.

“Sorry about that.”

I apologized to Kamakura by stroking him once, but he turned his face away and jumped off the sofa. He went up to the front of the door, jumped up to the knob, and skillfully opened it. He then left the living room. Hey, make sure to close the door, will ya? It’s winter so it’s freaking cold.

With Kamakura gone, I was completely alone.

Usually, this was a valuable period of time where I could relax and pass the time.

However, for how quiet it was, I was thinking of the same thing in my head the entire time.

They were about the student council election. I lost count of how many times I had gone between questioning and answering things about it.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. In the event that either one of them becomes the student council president, what problem might occur? That was the loss of the Service Club. That was fine in itself. It was inevitable. I knew it was going to happen sooner or later. Even if nothing came up, once we graduated, the club would disappear.

Then what was the problem? I already knew from the start that the club would disappear. So where was the problem there?

Wait, no, in the first place, why was I trying to look for a problem?

In fact, the act of trying to look for a problem itself would become the problem; so basically, the L'Cie chosen by the Pulse Fal'cie were purged from Cocoon…[1]

Whether I was thinking seriously or stupidly, an answer wouldn't come to mind.

I looked up to the ceiling and let out a deep sigh.

If I didn't understand the problem, then there shouldn't be an answer.

What it came down to was that I didn't have a "reason" that would be the prerequisite.

A reason to just move and to just act. A reason that captured the problem.

If there wasn't a reason that was the cause, then there would be no problem.

Isshiki's request was something nearly settled, what with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama running as candidates. You could even say that their plan was perfect with a high rate of success.

In that case, I had no turn.

That's why, as far as Isshiki's case was concerned, there was no reason to go against those two.

But even so, there was still this uneasy feeling that I needed to do something left. The question "was this okay as it is?" kept repeating itself. Every time, I would refute it, only for it to be asked again and I would refute it once more, this repetition never ending.

Jeez, what an awful disposition. Realizing things halfway through was quite a problem itself too.

Still, most of the problems up until now were settled just because. In the first place, there wasn't anyone who I could talk to about my problems, but even if there was someone, I wouldn't have gone to them anyway.

People should only approach those who they could reach or those who supported them.

If you tried to cross beyond the boundary to rely on them, both of you would meet your end. For instance, it was similar to asking a friend who you had a transparent relationship with to be your cosigner for a loan.

With that reason, the range of whom I could rely on was incredibly narrow.

As long you couldn't properly be someone's support, then you couldn't afford to ask for support yourself.

If we both met our end together, then I would be trampling on the kindness of the person who extended out their hand to me. I'd be trampling on the trust of the person who relied on me.

Living life without being a bother to others was the creed of loners. Not being the extra baggage of others was their pride. Therefore, the things that I normally could do were my pride.

That's why, I wouldn't rely on anyone and I wouldn't let anyone rely on me.

But if there was one exception to the rule, then that would be family.

You could bother your family as much as you wanted. I wouldn't mind regardless of how much a bother my family was to me.

Your family members would approach you freely with their trust and kindness and extend their hands out to you regardless of the possibility of the situation.

Even if my pops was kind of a super useless person, even if my mom was pretty lively and could be pretty annoying sometimes, even if I was a complete good-for-nothing, and even if my little sister who was cute and a little bit mean-spirited was somewhat shallow.

That relationship didn't need a reason.

In fact, even the reason "it's because they're family" would suffice.

Of course, it was the same when you couldn't forgive someone or hated someone.

But suppose if I were to rely on someone right now.

Then would that someone be from my family?

It's just, well, this wasn't a topic that I could talk about with pops and mom… Some use they were. They only existed to raise me, occasionally scold me, and give me love, didn't they? Worry about old age and your health before you worry about me, jeez. There were screaking sounds as the door of the living room opened.

Was it Kamakura again? Or so I thought as I turned around. The one who entered the living room was Komachi wearing a shirt bigger than her size.

Komachi looked like she was taking a break from her studies and came down to get a drink as she opened the refrigerator while ignoring me. But apparently there wasn't anything she seemed to like as she closed the door.

She looked like she only came down for a drink as she was about to leave the living room. I unintentionally called out to her from behind.

"Komachi."

"…What is it?"

Komachi moved only her head and looked at me from the side. She's still angry huh… Maybe this wasn't the best time to talk to her. But if I just told her it was nothing, it'd probably worsen her mood.

"Aah… do you want coffee?"

I stumbled for a moment before I asked her and Komachi nodded slightly.

"…Sure."

"…Roger that."

I stood up and got ready to make coffee. I poured water in the teakettle and set it. While waiting for it to boil, I took out two mugs and grabbed instant coffee.

Komachi rested her chin on her hands on the kitchen counter, waiting wordlessly for the water to boil.

I stood there wordlessly as well.

Eventually, the water boiled and I poured it into the mugs. The smell of coffee and the warmth of the water ascended. I turned the handle of the mug towards Komachi and handed it to her.

"Here."

"Mm."

Komachi took the cup and headed for the door. It looked like she was going to go back to her room.

The way she was moving clearly said not to talk to her until things cooled down between us, but not learning my lesson, I called out to her.

"Hey, Komachi…"

"…"

Komachi stopped in front of the door. However, she stood there silently waiting for my words without turning to me.

Was she thinking how I wouldn't give up despite saying something so late? As I worried about that, I spoke.

"…I have something I need to talk to you about."

"Mm. I'll hear you out."

But Komachi responded instantly and rested against the wall.

After facing each other for the first time after a whole week, we both looked at each other and laughed after a long time.

Komachi momentarily stopped her laugh and lightly cleared her throat.

"But before that, there's something else you need to say, right?"

It was as Komachi said. We were having a fight just moments ago so asking for a consultation out of the blue was too selfish. I scratched my head as I searched for the words I needed to say.

"…Well, you know, last time was kinda that. Sorry for speaking to you like that."

Komachi then had a puffy, sullen look.

"It's not just that. Your attitude, your personality, and also your eyes."

"I suppose…"

With that laid out before me, I didn't have a single rebuttal. Komachi continued further.

"Besides, I bet it was your fault that whatever happened anyway."

"Aah, you got that right."

There were no words I could respond with. Komachi's questioning continued on.

"Also, you still haven't apologized."

"Nng…. True enough."

When she brought it up, the words I expressed earlier probably weren't words you could call an apology.

Just as I was about to properly say it one more time, Komachi let out a small sigh. And then in resignation, she smiled kindly.

"But, well, considering it's onii-chan, that's good enough, as far as Komachi's concerned. Komachi's your little sister, after all. So I'll forgive you."

"Thanks for that…"

While I was the one who made her angry, wasn't she just being a little too cheeky right now…? I got the feeling my discontent was showing in my voice and face. Of course, Komachi noticed so I looked away for a bit and cleared my throat.

"Also… Komachi's sorry too."

Komachi was awfully polite in her bowing. Seeing that, I couldn't help, but smile sarcastically.

“Nah, you don’t need to worry about it. I’ll forgive you. I’m your big brother after all.”

“Whaaa, this person’s so arrogant!”

We both chuckled as we spoke. And then slowly drank our coffee. The coffee tasted delicious despite not having any milk, sugar, or condensed milk in it.

Komachi placed her mug on the table and asked me.

“So, what happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

“…That’s fine.”

When I answered, Komachi moved to the sofa and sat next to me.

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Narrating the long, long story had ended. I told her the circumstances regarding the field trip and now, the student council election.

Komachi brought back more coffee from the kitchen and placed it on the table in front of the sofa.

“I see… That sounds like something you’d do.”

Her first thought she expressed was that.

“But you know, the only one who would see that would be just me. Because we’ve been living together for so long I can understand.”

I reached out for my mug. Komachi poured milk and a good amount of sugar, making the coffee just warm.

She quietly sat next to me and Komachi put her mug to her mouth. She took a sip and raised her head.

“I’d just think this person’s so dumb and just laugh it off. I’d even think how really hopeless this person is, but… I would be a little sad.”

Komachi lifted her legs onto the sofa and hugged her knees.

“But that doesn’t apply to other people. They won’t understand at all and I think they’ll find it very painful too.”

I wasn’t looking for anyone to understand. That was likely something you would call self-satisfaction. In truth, they were actions that weren’t for anyone’s sake. There was no way they could understand or sympathize.

But the one exception was my little sister, Komachi. However, Komachi had a slightly sad smile.

“You’re kind to me, but that’s only because I’m your little sister… If I wasn’t your little sister, I’m sure you wouldn’t get anywhere close to me.”

“Nah, I dunno about that.”

When she said so, I gave it some thought.

Komachi who wasn't my little sister… Whoa, what's with this beautiful, ultra, marvelous girl with such high specs? I definitely could see a future where I committed suicide after getting my proposal to her instantly rejected, so I definitely had to avoid getting closer to her…

I see. But that would never happen. In the first place, I couldn't imagine Komachi ever not being my little sister. Even so, it probably wasn't just about getting along with anyone. It didn't matter whether Komachi was my little sister or not, I hadn't associated with anyone in the first place…

Komachi was Komachi. There wasn't any meaning in supposing she wasn't my little sister.

"Well, putting that supposition aside, I'm glad you're my little sister though. That just now was definitely high in Hachiman points."

"O-Onii-chan….!"

Komachi covered her face as if trying to hide her wet eyes. She also added a big service by sniffing with tears of joy. But that ended earlier than it should have and in the next moment, she spoke sarcastically with a nonchalant expression.

"Well, for Komachi, if you weren't my onii-chan, I definitely wouldn't get anywhere near you, let alone consider you at all."

…Wait a second? Was this girl still mad? Those words were bordering on the line of domestic violence, so could you please stop?

"Nah, wait, so you say, but even I have some good things to me too, right?"

"None at all. Gosh, I don't want this. Such a pain."

You didn't have to go that far… You just made big brother really sad. Not to mention she had a pretty serious face just now.

She really wasn't cute at all…

As I clicked my tongue while unpleasantly thinking, Komachi quickly smiled and pushed against my body.

"But this is just how we show our love after a good 15 years together. Ah, that scored high Komachi points!"

Uh huh, the words you said earlier were definitely low on the Komachi points though.

But oddly enough, Komachi's words were convincing.

"…Well, I guess that's how it is after living together for fifteen years, huh?"

The time that we accumulated definitely had weight to it. At least to my uncute little sister who thought of it dearly.

Suddenly, my shoulders got heavy. When I looked, Komachi was resting her body against mine.

“Fifteen years from now. No, that’s not it. There’s definitely a longer period than that too.”

That was surely about the possibilities. The possibility that in the same way it took fifteen years for me to get along well Komachi, there might be someone else who I could do the same with.

But for me right now, that wouldn’t be realistic.

“Quit it with the sophism.”

“How long do you think I’ve been listening to your sophistry?”

When I responded, Komachi replied back sullenly. She then poked my cheeks with her fingers.

“There’re things now and things later! Got that!?”

“R-Right…”

When I answered, Komachi nodded in acknowledgment and pulled her fingers away from my cheeks. She then made a solemn expression.

“…It’s not just you, but also for Komachi. There’re still plenty of things down the road for us. I really like Yukino-san and Yui-san. That’s why I’ll be in a bind if that club disappears. I mean, if it’s gone, then we’ll all drift apart.”

Just because you see each other every day didn’t mean you’d get along. If you didn’t ever meet with the person you got along with, then you’d drift apart anyway. This inversely proportional relationship that the emotions of people had was something I couldn’t explain.

With her head resting on my shoulders, Komachi spoke with a gentle voice.

“That’s why for my sake, for my friends’ sake, isn’t there something that can be done?”

“…If it’s my little sister asking, how could I say no?”

I was a fantastic older brother who would normally do what I could for my little sister.

That was the one answer Komachi had given me.

If she never said it, then I probably wouldn’t have gone anywhere.

The reason that I was always searching for somewhere.

The perfect reason that would let me protect that place and that time.

I muttered and Komachi smiled, speaking in a monotone voice.

“Uh huh, it’s for Komachi’s sake after all. Komachi’s super selfish after all. You can’t say no after all!”

“Seriously.”

I violently rubbed Komachi’s head. While going “kyaaa”, Komachi shook her face along with my hands.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Komachi proudly answered to my gratitude. I moved my hands away from Komachi’s head and looked at the clock.

“Guess we should sleep. It’s pretty late.”

“Okay, good night then.”

“Yeah, night.”

Komachi stood up and went back to her room.

As I saw her off, I collapsed onto the sofa once again.

I managed to get a hold of a reason and the problem.

I still didn’t understand what Yukinoshita’s intent was. That’s why I wasn’t able to say anything up until now.

And I wasn’t convinced of Yuigahama’s method. But I could understand it. Because it resembled how I did things.

At some point, my way of doing things wasn’t akin to self-sacrifice. There wasn’t anything mistaken about it.

I dealt out the hand that was limited in number, aimed for efficiency, and did my best. As a result, something was definitely gained.

That’s why, subjectively, I could say it was perfect from my view.

But if an objective alternative existed, then that perfection would crumble to pieces.

Even in the stares of pity and sympathy reflected clichéd narcissism. Pity and sympathy were emotions that looked down on others. Self-pity was the act of humiliating yourself. Both were despicable and completely ugly acts.

But there definitely existed something more objective beyond pity and sympathy.

When it was vividly dangled before my eyes, it was the first time I became aware of it.

I just didn’t want anyone to be hurt.

That feeling was something different from pity and sympathy.

That's why, I definitely wouldn't call her actions self-sacrifice and I definitely wouldn't let anyone call it that.

In order to keep Yukinoshita Yukino and Yuigahama Yui from becoming the student council president.

What is it that Hikigaya Hachiman can do?

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It was the following morning after making up with Komachi.

I've been thinking ever since the morning.

About what it is that Hikigaya Hachiman could do.

But I couldn't think of a single thing and it freaked me out how serious I was at it. H-Huh? Now that's odd… I felt like I could do anything last night too…

In thinking about it, in the first place, my current position didn't have the luxury of a lot of choices to pick from.

For example, suppose I went against them by becoming a candidate for the student council president. So what then? Then, I wouldn't even be able to do that because I wouldn't be able to amass endorsements.

Or what if I tried to obstruct their campaign activities? But that also had no meaning if I did it by myself. Besides, libel and slander in the form of fliers was different from hate speech. It's not like I wanted to trick them or cause them any backlash.

I could only come up with two things and one of them was to obstruct them… It was surprising how little I could do.

In the student council election where it was law that the majority would absolutely win, for someone of my caliber, our compatibility was quite terrible.

But this was my just desserts. There was no one who I could ask for cooperation. The kind of relationship you were forgiven for being a burden to the other person was something I had not forged up until now with anyone.

What tormented me now was my past self. It's likely my future self may be tormented by my current self.

After getting to school, I continued to think and think, but nothing ever came to mind. Even though I had finally obtained an objective too.

Even in the afternoon, I still couldn't think of anything. There was barely any time left before the day of the election. The voting would take place next week on Thursday. Today was Tuesday.

Although there was plenty of time given the remaining week of time, I was the only one who could do the job. On top of that, I didn't even have one plan that could oppose them either.

Prevent Isshiki Iroha from being elected as the student council president as well as not letting Yukinoshita and Yuigahama get elected. I couldn't help but think how unfeasible this sounded regardless of whatever clever scheme I could think of.

The one and only possibility was introducing a new candidate. But I was the one who rejected that notion.

Postpone the election? Or destroy the very system of the student president council election itself?

But those two approaches just weren't realistic. I was at a complete stalemate.

Even so, I still had to do something.

I headed to the library to search for things I could do even if I was alone.

The library during lunch was deserted.

Because the library was well off from class and didn't allow eating or drinking, it wasn't a very popular place to be. It was only before term tests when the library would be crowded.

I examined the book shelves to look for material regarding civil rights, history books on Sobu High School, and documents that looked like it had rough outlines of the student council election.

Suppose those two were aiming to win the election. They had to think about their campaign platform as well as their campaign speech. If something came to mind while I was searching for these types of documents, then I lucked out. If I came across a loophole in the election, then bingo.

But, unable to find any suitable documents, I made continuous trips back and forth to the shelves. If I noticed anything closely resembling to what I was looking for, I would pull it out.

As I extended out my hand to the highest shelf, my fingers were caught by something and a book fell down.

"Whoa."

I reflexively avoided the book by moving my head, but instead, it crashed onto my chest. As I unintentionally hacked out a cough, I choked on the saliva that entered my trachea.

As I stood there coughing violently, a thick book that was sticking out on the shelf caused the neighboring books to lose their balance as they tilted over. This then led to a domino effect with the thin and light books hitting the floor noisily.

The sound of falling books and my violent fit echoed in the quiet library and the few people using the library looked at me with distant eyes. No, no, I understand how you guys feel. I take the same attitude when I see annoying idiots in the library too.

So I somehow kept my coughing to a minimum and worked to restore the original state of the books.

There were scattered books at my feet and collapsed books on the shelves.

Aaaaah, what am I going to do about this? Jeez.

I let out a rough snort and I kneeled down to pick up the books. When I did, an overbearing, high voice called out to me from behind my curled back.

"What a wretched sight, Hikigaya Hachiman. Wahaha!"

I didn't have to turn around to tell who it was. Zaimokuza Yoshiteru was standing behind me, laughing loudly.

"Don't go spouting dumb crap. This wretchedness is set to default for me. You need something?"

"That's a foolish inquiry. During lunch, I usually abide my time here. And then when you showed up, I thought I would express my greetings!"

Damn it, you're so annoying, so lame, and such a pain. Just this small of an exchange and I was already having this feeling of fatigue. My shoulders dropped even further in addition to its level with my curled back.

Zaimokuza looked at me and suddenly kneeled down and met my eyes.

"…Hm? What's the matter Hachiman? Could it be that something worries you?"

"…Not at all, it's just useless musings, that's all."

It wasn't anything to talk about to other people. But Zaimokuza readjusted his glasses and spoke.

"Try talking."

"No, I'm good. It's not something others should be listening to."

"Don't say something so foolish. How many times do you think I've had you listen to my idle chatter to this day…? I'll at least hear out your story… Hmph, I, who extend a helping hand to the weak, am super cool."

Did you get drunk on yourself perhaps? And also, "weak", you say… Was it that? Were you the type that had the desire of wanting to try and nurse a frail girl back to good health? I could understand that a little.

But regardless of what his intentions were, I wasn't expecting those words to come from Zaimokuza. A smile spilled out on my face because of that.

"…Maybe if you didn't add those last few words at the end. So, who are you copying?"

I told him and Zaimokuza proudly smiled.

"No, it was from me."

“Idiot. Don’t go saying something so cool.”

I was half impressed and half sad.

But still, Zaimokuza, huh… Up until now, there was absolutely no trace of him in my memories, but if it was him, then I might be able to rely on him.

If it’s him, then…

Right. If it’s him, then it wouldn’t make my heart ache at all even if I was a burden on him. I didn’t even need to consider whether he was taking any damage or not because he was already taking fatal damage. He was a man who lived on, unable to take anything back. In another meaning, he was an existence closest to mine.

Jeez, talk about unreliable. However, he was someone you could believe in to destroy the mood whether it was good or bad. Above all else, we had been pairs in gym class for a long time. We’re just a completely, useless pairing though.

“…Zaimokuza, I have a favor.”

“Oh homn, very well. So? What shall we do first?”

I was surprised by his immediate response and I still had yet to think of what to ask of him.

“Let’s see… First, help me clean up.”

“R-Right… Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed after all…”

He was probably expecting a cool development. Zaimokuza suddenly reverted back to his true self and after letting out a small murmur, he obediently began organizing the book shelf.

Sorry to say, but it absolutely wouldn’t turn into the developments Zaimokuza were fond of. If anything, it was going to end badly. Zaimokuza and I would be teaming up. It’s obvious where this was heading.

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I gave Zaimokuza a quick rundown of the student council election and left the matter of what we were going to do specifically for after school.

In the time during afternoon classes, I gave some consideration into how I could play the piece called Zaimokuza with the current. But should I say that it was unfortunate or that it was obvious? Nothing came to mind. Is there really anything Zaimokuza and I could do, I wonder…?

In the end, I couldn’t think of anything and it was approaching after school. I had to meet up with Zaimokuza afterwards. Although I was the one who asked him for a favor, it was my bad personality’s fault that made me think that maybe this was a little bit of a pain after all.

Once homeroom ended, my classmates left the classroom. Those who went to club, those who went home, those who went out to have fun; everybody headed in different directions.

Amongst those people was a tightly knit group that didn't leave the classroom. A group with blond, brown, and black hair naturally attracted the attention around them.

Rustling her pink dyed brown hair while looking perplexed, Yuigahama groaned.

"Hmhmhmhm, mmmm…"

In her hand was a mechanical pencil, but there were no signs of it moving.

Sitting in a seat next to her and pulling at her blonde curls was Miura who gasped as if she thought of something.

"Ah, how about casual clothes when coming to school?"

"That's it!"

Yuigahama pointed at Miura and immediately jotted it down on her piece of paper. But once again, her hands stopped moving and she began to stutter.

Sitting across from them was Ebina-san who was also combing through her short black hair and she groaned as she contemplated.

"It'd be nice if we could get rid of personal belonging searches! They like to do that every now and then. Having something that really puts me in a bind, you see. I tend to leave the doujinshis I borrow from my friends in my bag after all."

"That only applies to you, Ebina."

Miura said that to Ebina-san who giggled amusingly.

"H-Hmmmm, I-I'll write it down for now."

"You don't need to write it down. Anyway, I totally want to eat on the rooftop too."

"I'll take that too!"

Apparently, the three were thinking of what kind of platform they were going with for their campaign speech. It was likely because of club that Hayama and the others weren't present. That said, Hayama was doing the speech for Yukinoshita, so he couldn't cooperate with Yuigahama either.

Ever since Miura witnessed Hayama hanging out with Orimoto and her friend the other day, Miura would look agitated and absentminded, but since the actual person in question wasn't present, she was having a good time without having to be conscious of him.

"Also, the bus is too crowded. It's annoying."

She twirled her hair with her hands and crossed her long legs as she answered… Actually, she might even be worse than usual.

"Is that really something the student council should be dealing with…? Well, whatever, I'll write it anyway."

Yuigahama thought as she listened to Miura and after pressing her pencil against her head, she wrote it down. Following this, Ebina-san quickly clapped her hands.

"Ah, I also want a tablet in the arts room."

"Tablet… I'm not sure I understand, but I'll write it down anyway!"

As I watched those three from a distance, I stood up from my seat.

…Yuigahama was seriously planning on entering the election, huh? How she's approaching it and how she's handling it was very like her.

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When I headed for the Saizeriya near the station, Zaimokuza had already arrived. It was times like these that he was convenient since I could easily find him without checking the entire store. I headed to where he was sitting, pulled out a chair, and sat.

"Sorry for making you wait."

I spoke and Zaimokuza waved his hands indicating not to mind it. His mouth moved as he chewed and on the table was an empty plate. Apparently he was eating something. Judging by the leftover flour on the plate, he was likely eating focaccia. Near the plate was opened gomme syrup. Eating the focaccia smeared with gomme syrup must be pretty good, huh?

Speaking of which, I missed eating lunch this afternoon. I guess I'll order something too or so I thought when the moment I opened up the menu, I had a sudden realization. Even if I talked it over with Zaimokuza, that didn't mean we'd come across a revelation so easily. It's possible that this could take a while. If that was the case, then I may have to consider dinner as well.

I took out my cellphone and called Komachi. An unknown song played instead of the usual dialing tone. Why was it that every time I called her, there would always be some song playing…? As I thought that, Komachi picked up the phone.

"Yes, yes?"

"I don't need dinner today."

"Why's that?"

"Just meeting with Zaimokuza, er, well, you know, a meeting of the sort."

"…Hmmm, where are you eating?"

"The Saizeriya near school."

"Got it!"

“Mm.”

The phone cut off. Being able to get the message across in less than thirty seconds with minimal words made it easier for me.

Zaimokuza was watching me from the side while drinking his cola in gulps and spoke up with a motivated tone.

“Now then, Hachiman. Shall we get started…? Although I’m still unclear as to what will get started.”

Despite not understanding the situation, he was still so motivated. Rather than feeling he was dependable, I was feeling uneasy instead.

“Before that, you mind if I grab a bite? I’m starving.”

“Hmph, so you need to fill your stomach, is that it? Eat as you please.”

“My gratitude to you.”

After I said that, I pressed the order button. As a pro Saizerian (customers of Saizeriya), I didn’t fret over what to order. For the most part, most of the regular menu was in my head and the only time I needed to check the menu was for seasonal limited offers and new products. And then, in the time it takes the waiter to come take my order, I review all the combinations and decide.

By the time the waiter arrived, my order was already ready to go.

“Milanese Doria and the Mixed Grill with the drink bar.”

Beeping sounds could be heard as the waiter pressed into the smartphone-like handheld device the order and Zaimokuza reservedly raised his hand.

“Ah, can I also get Spicy Chicken… Ah, also Hayashi Tumeric too.”

You’re still going to eat…? No, that’s fine. It’s pretty good after all. Chicken that is.

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Dinner took nearly an hour and with our stomachs full, we decided to get into the main topic. I took a sip of my coffee and spoke to Zaimokuza.

“Alright, you got the explanation about the election, right?”

“Indeed. So the main idea is how we will go about keeping those two from getting elected, correct?”

Zaimokuza nodded in exaggeration. But after thinking for a moment, he groaned.

“However…”

“What is it?”

“Why can’t those two be elected?”

He tilted his head and asked me a very naïve question. Well, that was something typical to ask. In reality, the number of people against those two becoming the president was few and far in between. Or I should say it was more likely that the majority didn't care who got elected.

I personally had a reason of my own. But saying it to him honestly made me hesitate. I wasn't confident I'd be able to explain it well either.

Instead, I shot a question back at Zaimokuza.

"If Yukinoshita or Yuigahama became president, what kind of school do you think it would turn into?"

"Hmph, it may very well become a world unkind to someone like me…"

Sweat dripped down Zaimokuza's brow as he answered.

"Well, that understanding's good enough."

But even if Yukinoshita or Yuigahama became president, I don't think the school would undergo any big changes. Student councils in high school didn't have the power to change the school from the bottom up. What I said just now was nothing more than sophistry. I didn't think Zaimokuza would be completely convinced with this, but I had to go with this sophistry to get him on board.

"So, the question is what we will be doing exactly…"

Just as he was about to move the conversation along, my cellphone vibrated. As I thought "what, another mail from Amazon?" while looking at my phone, it was a call from Komachi. I lightly raised my hand to Zaimokuza, gave him an apologetic look for interrupting him and picked up my phone.

"Hello?"

"Oh, there he is."

The voice didn't come from the phone, but from behind me.

When I turned around, it was Komachi in her school uniform.

"…Huh, what's wrong?"

"I heard you were meeting with someone… so here I am!"

No, it's not "here I am". It's not like I called you over… or so I was about to complain to her until an unthinkable person appeared from behind her.

"Could it be we were interrupting?"

The person was wearing a familiar jersey with a tennis bag over his shoulders, standing idly. When he made a troubled smile, he looked more angelic than the painting with an angel decorating the wall.

"To, TotTo…"

To, Totototo, Totsukaa! Not good, I was too surprised that my voice wouldn't come out properly.

Since we normally didn't meet with each other, meeting like this surprised me so much that I thought this was some sort of fated love. But from what I could see, this seemed like something Komachi had contrived so it wasn't actually love, but a fake love[2]. In that case, that was a relief. Now that I feel relieved, I could build my Gundam and fight![3]

My words were lodged in my throat and I was unable to react properly to which Totsuka sent me a worried look. In order to quickly rid him of that unease I talked on and on.

"Nope, that's not true at all. Why don't you have a seat for now?"

I quickly moved my belongings on the chair next to me and pulled the chair out. This was what you call a legitimate plan to get Totsuka to sit next to me. Am I a genius or what?

"Ah, did you want to eat something?"

I showed my true colors as a gentleman as I began speaking to the angel painting on the wall. Whoa, close one! I mixed them up! They're both angels after all! Still, why was there a painting of an angel hung up on the wall at Saizeriya?

"Ah, okay…"

While saying that, Totsuka sat next to me innocently. When he did, Zaimokuza squealed "fumph" and passed the menu to Totsuka. Zaimokuza may have been nervous because his voice wouldn't come out properly. Surprisingly, my combination with Zaimokuza here wasn't too bad.

"Maybe I'll get a peperoncino… Ah, but it has garlic… Hmm…"

Totsuka looked over the menu and began worrying. It was just this time that I didn't press the button at all. Now, now, please choose as much as you like. Please go ahead and choose whatever you like, whether it was peperencino or Peepee Lotion.

While Totsuka was thinking about what to order, I stood next to Komachi and whispered into her ears.

"Komachi, what's going on here?"

"If onii-chan's going to work for Komachi's sake, then Komachi's gotta try just as hard, right?"

Ooh, you really did do your best. Just as I extended my hand out to rub her head, Komachi avoided it and took a step back behind me saying "I'll do that". She then proudly puffed out her chest.

"So that being the case, I mass recruited some helping hands."

She spoke in a showcase kind of manner and spread her hands to show something.

And what she was showing was Kawa… Kawaguchiko-san? No, I think it was Yamanakako-san? Well, Kawawhatever-san was good enough I guess. Then again, Komachi, you knew her contact info? I didn't even know her name, you know.

Kawawhatever-san thrust her hands into her pockets and pouted with a displeased tone while glancing at me.

"Why me…"

She grumbled with a small voice. When her eyes met with mine, she would stutter and look away. Well, I'm very sorry about this. Making you come here and all even though you don't like it.

Well, it's understandable if Kawawhatever-san was here since she went to the same school as me. She had the right to vote as well so it wasn't like she was all that unrelated.

But there was one more person who was completely unrelated.

"So, why's *that* here too?"
I checked with Komachi and *that* answered in an awfully energetic manner.

"It's not 'that!' It's Kawasaki Taishi!"

No, again, why were you even here … Was it that? Were you here to tell me that Kawawhatever-san's name was in fact Kawasaki? You're a big help.

But that apparently wasn't the case as Komachi scratched her head and smiled.

"Even Komachi didn't have Saki-san's phone number, you see."

"Aah, so that's how it is."

That made sense.

"Well, now that you contacted her, *that* isn't needed anymore, right?"

"I'm not 'that!' I'm Kawasaki Taishi!"

Taishi tried to appeal to me again, not discouraged. If your older sister appealed to me in the same way, I don't think I'd forget her name either. As I thought that, Kawasaki glared at me.

"Did you just say he isn't needed right now?"

"No, um, he's totally needed, yep…"

For keeping Kawasaki's state of mind healthy, that is. I wanted her to stop staring at me with that sharp glare of hers that wavered between whether she was going to kill me or not killing similar to something like Kill La Kill.

"Why don't we have a seat for now?"

Komachi spoke to mediate the situation and we moved to a table over. Kawasaki and Taishi sat in the inner seats while Komachi sat next to me. She was a woman who could nonchalantly pick the seat on the open side.

After everyone confirmed their orders, we listed down our orders on the book, set our drinks on the table, and Komachi cleared her throat.

"Without further ado, let's begin the 'Yukino-san and Yui-san Sabotage Obstruction' plan!"

Komachi exclaimed and Totsuka and Taishi gave a round of applause while Zaimokuza nodded.

Totsuka and Kawasaki were probably filled in on the details at the beginning as they didn't raise any concerns. She truly was a capable little sister. However, Kawasaki voiced a different doubt as she rested her chin in her hands while looking away.

"Is there any meaning in calling me out?"

"You're a student of Sobu High School as well so by all means, we'd like to borrow your help too, Saki-san."

Komachi giggled with a cute smile as she praised her. Stop rubbing your hands together. But Kawasaki's attitude stayed the same with Komachi's sly use of her hands not getting through to her.

"Hmph, I don't think I'll be very useful though."

"No, just getting your opinion would help a lot."

When I said that, Kawasaki looked at me for a split moment, but quickly went back to what she was looking at earlier.

"…You don't really need an opinion like mine."

Kawasaki said that, but considering our positions here, I could use her opinion as a reference.

Since I was a part of the lowest denominator of the hierarchy at school, I was already assimilated with the underlings there. As such, there would be bias on my part towards the candidates Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The opinion of someone who had a good amount of distance between those two would serve as a better reference than mine. This was one of the necessary criteria when you were evaluating something.

Just as I was about to explain, the food had arrived.

We waited for the waiter to leave, but this caused a temporary lull in the conversation which felt like we had missed the timing. I guess I'll at least say the conclusion.

"I need it."

Kawasaki blinked with surprise.

"I-I see… Well, if, you say so…"

As she said that, Kawasaki pulled up her cup with iced tea in it, looked away, and sipped her straw. The sound of bubbling came from her empty cup as if she wasn't listening. Could she be tired, I wonder?

Making her accompany us on something this troublesome made me slightly sorry for her.

"Sorry."

When I apologized, Kawasaki let go of her cup and rested her chins in her hands again.

After she sat there thinking for a little bit, she looked at me and spoke.

"It's okay. When you're in that club… it suits you a lot more."

"Huh? Why?"

There wasn't any particular elements that made me suited with the club. Just the concepts of the words "service", "work", and "labor" were things I hated too.

"N-Nothing. Recently, I just thought you weren't your usual self, that's all."

As expected of a loner, her observation skills were excellent. This must be the Buddha Eyes. Human observation was a skill of loners.

"Usual self", huh?

But if we were talking about my usual self, then what I was doing right now wasn't very usual of me. I didn't give up on the club and instead, I wanted to try to protect it. No matter how you thought about it, it wasn't very like me at all.

But this apparently was seen differently by others around me. Sitting next to me was Komachi who chuckled while smiling.

"I guess onii-chan really isn't going to try to uselessly struggle this time, huh?"

Aah, that really did fit.

Even if the PowerPoint was cut off and all of our alternatives disappeared, I would still try to do something. That was uselessly struggling. I didn't mind if I took any damage. After all, if I was just going to lose in the end, I'd at least want to get back a blow or two in to make it unpleasant for the other party.

That was something very like of me.

Then let's try challenging with a method befitting of me.

First, let's verify from a nearby successful example.

I faced Komachi. Komachi should be in the student council of her middle school. So that meant she had experience of being chosen at the election. She should've participated in campaign efforts as well. That's why I decided to ask about that.

"Komachi, how did you win your election?"

When I asked Komachi, she moaned for a little bit as she thought and started off with a preface.

"In Komachi's case, I won with a vote of confidence, so I don't think it'll work as a reference…"

"That's fine. If you had some sort of election strategy, tell me that."

"Okay… Let's see. Before I announced my candidacy, I would declare 'I'm going to do it' on a regular basis. As long as I did that and nothing major came up, not much opposition would pop up."

"I see…"

Although it wasn't exactly the concept of victory going to the one who made the first move, if you went ahead and limited the other party's ability to act, even if there were other people who wanted to do it, they might hesitate. As expected of my little sister, she was very crafty.

I gave her a look asking if there was anything else and Komachi crossed her arms and began to groan.

"Also… Boys might have an advantage at times like these. Well, this only applies to popular and reliable boys though."

"Well, it's that. It might be a bit hard for guys to vote for a girl. If it's middle school, that kind of atmosphere might be prevalent."

"Mmmm, well, that's true too."

Komachi spoke vaguely and made an unclear smile.

"What is it?"

I asked about where she was leading the conversation and she stuck up her index finger.

"In the case of girls, you make an enemy of half of the girl population."

O-Oh… I caught a glimpse of my little sister who became a full-fledged member of women society before I even realized it. Onii-chan's happy about your growth Komachi, but I'm just a little sad…

Sitting across from me was Taishi who was withdrawing a little. He was facing downwards blabbering about something.

"You're so black… Hikigaya-san, you're so black."

"Don't go telling someone's little sister that they're black."

If anything, the one who was black was your older sister, like her panties.

Whatever the case, there were parts to Komachi's story that served as a reference.

"Using girls' antagonism against each other, huh…"

“The ‘Two Tigers Becoming Enemies’[4] strategy!”

Zaimokuza suddenly responded. Listening to that, Totsuka tilted his head.

“But wouldn’t that mean we’d get Yukinoshita-san and Yuigahama-san to fight?”

“That’s true… Also, if everyone gets too heated up, then a proxy war would start and that’ll end up influencing things down the road…”

Komachi spoke seriously. That’s just common opinion, right? That wasn’t something that happened to you, right? I’m worried…

But true enough. That was something to be worried about. I could imagine Miura being involved in one of those proxy wars… And then Yukinoshita would retaliate with double the payback and Miura would cry. But having those two taking unnecessary damage was out of the question.

I tilted my head asking everyone if there was anything else and Zaimokuza, also Taishi, raised their hands.

“I propose the ‘Empty Castle’ Strategy!”

“Maybe having someone else become the candidate might work?”

You’re amazing, Taishi. You completely ignored Zaimokuza right there. Not to mention, he contributed his opinion despite being a complete outsider. This guy might be a big shot, surprisingly. But that said, that was something Yukinoshita and Yuigahama had considered and I opposed.

“I thought of that before. Besides, if they’re not up to their level, they won’t win against those two.”

Honestly speaking, the only one who could pull votes from those two would be Hayama. But those votes were now being delegated to Yukinoshita’s side while the girl group of Hayama was on Yuigahama’s side. Any other candidate wouldn’t be able to butt in at all.

Taishi started thinking once again.

“Ah, so maybe you can’t win by yourself, but what if there were a lot of you?”

“Ooh! Chiritsumo, huh!”

Komachi tapped her knees. Chiritsumo was probably the abbreviation of “if you were to amass a bunch of trash”[5] or whatever.

So flood the election with a bunch of candidates… If we did that, we certainly would be able to cut down the number of votes those two would get. Could we do it? No, the candidate most likely to get votes would win in the end regardless. That meant either of those two would win anyway.

If going against them or flooding the election was too difficult, then we had to think of another course of action.

“A way to win against Yukinoshita and Yuigahama…”

As I murmured, sitting there quietly while listening, Saki spoke up.

“I don’t really care, but if Yukinoshita and Yuigahama aren’t doing it, then who’s going to do it then?”

“…Ah.”

Crap, I completely forgot about Isshiki.

“Really, you…”

Kawasaki sighed in resignation. No, no, I’m ashamed of myself too.

If we kept Yukinoshita and Yuigahama from becoming the student council president, then it would fall onto Isshiki. That’s not good. As long those three were the only candidates, one of them would have to take up the role.

Talk about being backed into a corner.

As I scratched my head, I started thinking again from the bottom up with Isshiki in mind. When I did, an excessively good voice found its way to my ears.

“Homu, now that it has come to this, our last stand…”

I raised my head towards that voice and my eyes met with Zaimokuza’s eyes.

“Zaimokuza…”

“Indeed.”

Zaimokuza nodded his head in satisfaction. Jeez, a guy like you… I couldn’t help but smile.

“You have my thanks for a lot of things. I’m grateful for your feelings. It’s just that this is kind of hard to say, but sorry, you’ve been a real bother since a while ago.”

“Houngh!”

Zaimokuza was taken aback. Well, your Three Kingdoms appeals were pretty annoying… But Zaimokuza was a man who would crawl his way back up no matter how many times you stepped over him. “It’s wheat! It’ll become wheat!”[6] which was something Gen would say as I sat up straight.

“Ahem, were you not the one who proposed the idea? Is that not why I am here, laying bare my war tactics, plans, and art of war before you?”

He readjusted his glasses and looked at me.

“Well, they’re not actually things you thought up of though.”

“Silence you! In the first place, Hachiman, your chances of winning against them are close to zero. Just simple strategy won’t procure you victory. Therefore, you have no choice, but to fight with tactics.”

It felt like he was saying something quite natural…

Totsuka who was listening tilted his head.

“Um… Are strategy and tactics different?”

“Eh? Er… I-Indeed. To learn the difference between the two, all present should go ahead and use a dictionary!”

Zaimokuza tried to play the question off fervently as he looked at me again.

“From the start, trying to fight with them is wrong in itself.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

It was mortifying, but I couldn’t give a rebuttal to Zaimokuza. True enough, I wasn’t someone who could fight and win. Just fighting was useless or correctly speaking, I doubt I could even put up a fight. Not only was our difference in battle capacity overwhelming, our party wasn’t standing anywhere on the battle stage.

Not good, the situation was a lot worse than I thought.

As I scratched my head, Komachi called out to me.

“Onii-chan.”

“Hm?”

“It’s as Chuuni-san said.”

“Yeah, Onii-chan understands that too, but look here Komachi-chan…”

Let me think about it a little more carefully, okay? I spoke to Komachi like how I would to a little child for the time being.

I think “to win without fighting” was a proverb that was left by Sun Tzu. Maybe if I became Sun Tzu, I might come up with something. I’m Sun Tzu, I’m Sun Tzu, I am the one who is called Sun Tzu, Sun Tzu is I… Abiko7? So basically, Chiba was winning without having to fight because we already had Abiko…? I knew it, Chiba was the strongest.

As I went on a tangent while thinking, Komachi pulled at my sleeve.

“It’s not like Komachi wants onii-chan to win the election.”

“Huh? Wait, but if we don’t win.”

If we didn’t win, then one of those three would end up becoming the student council president.

“If anything, you’re not even a candidate, so it’s not even an issue about winning or losing.”

Kawasaki sighed as if she was making a fool of me. What a sound argument… No, that really was true, but come on.

“Ahaha, Hachiman’s the type of person who wouldn’t get tied down by rules after all.”

Totsuka made an embarrassed laugh and spoke to mediate the situation. What an angel. If Totsuka's going to say that much, then maybe it's about time we stopped being held down by that rule in the Civil Code of Chapter 4, Section 28.

As I was healed, Komachi forcibly turned my body to face towards her.

"Komachi wants Yukino-san and Yui-san to stay in the Service Club. Frankly, Komachi doesn't care about the student council election at all."

"Ah, right… But then there's Isshiki too…"

As long I had taken up the request, it wasn't something I could just shrug off. Most of all, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, Hiratsuka-sensei, and Meguri-senpai probably wouldn't just say "okay" to it either.

Staying reluctant, Komachi stared at me.

"Onii-chan, is that Isshiki-san person the most important to you?"

"No, absolutely not."

"Then why are you worrying about it?"

"Well, look, it's a request after all."

When I answered, Komachi squeezed my face with both her hands.

"Work or Komachi, which is important?"

"Komachi obviously. I have no desire to work."

I shook off Komachi's hands as I boldly answered with lots of love.

"Process of elimination, huh…"

Totsuka looked amazed as he made a troubled laugh. Ah, if it was Totsuka, I would've answered "Totsuka" unconditionally.

Komachi pouted as she lightly glared at me, but her mouth broke into a smile.

"I'm totally not happy at you being honest, but… well, fine. So, onii-chan, what are you going to do?"

"I understand what you're trying to say. But I don't have any intention of forcing the student council presidency on Isshiki."

That was what they called being the self-sacrifice. That's why I couldn't give my approval to it. Even if there was a reason to it, that reason would've just been mine alone and Isshiki Iroha had nothing to do with it. Selfishly pushing the circumstances onto her; originally, no one ever had the right to force someone to be the victim.

"…Okay, I get it. Well, it's onii-chan after all."

Komachi looked down with slightly sad eyes, but quickly smiled in resignation.

"Uh huh, as expected, Hachiman's Hachiman after all."

Totsuka followed up and smiled.

“Hmm…”

Kawasaki looked a little bit surprised, but she made a smile that looked interested somehow. But whenever her eyes met with mine, she would quickly look away and bite onto her straw. She then peeked over to me and spoke.

“Whatever’s fine, but… what are you going to do?”

“Let me think for a bit.”

I silently closed my eyes.

I established the setting where I prioritize Komachi’s request and omit Yukinoshita and Yuigahama from the election. Isshiki Iroha would then be the only candidate. Since the chances of other candidates coming forth were low, I could ignore it at this point.

But there, the condition that someone had to take all the heat surfaced.

So what was the remaining problem?

The actual person’s will; it was just that one point alone.

That being the case, I had to think of a way to overturn that.

In other words, I needed to destroy every single thing related to the reason why she didn’t want to become the student council president.

When I reached that point, I opened my eyes.

“So long story short, the way we approached this from the start was completely wrong…”

Not only me, but also Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

“Well, if that’s the case, I guess the only thing I can do is negotiate with Isshiki.”

“That is only if she is someone open to discussion… The other party is a girl, am I correct? Will your story get through to her?”

Zaimokuza muttered. His reason was kind of weird, but for the most part, I could agree, so it put me on the spot. And sitting next to him was Taishi who was also nodding for some reason. In addition to that, he asked something as if it was out of curiosity.

“What kind of person is Isshiki-san?”

“Let’s see…”

Isshiki Iroha. She would show her gentle and refreshing self, but that was all part of her calculations. The staggering difference between how she acted with Hayama and people not in her consideration like me and Tobe was quite devastating.

Putting it into words was extremely difficult. But how would this work if I said it this way?

“If I were to give an example, then it’d be something like a very uncute and charmless Komachi, I guess.”

“Ah, that might be bad, huh?”

So said Taishi.

“Onii-chan, what ever could you mean by that…?”

A smiling Komachi was scary.

“It’s basically that. It just means you’re very cute Komachi.”

I said something suitable and rubbed her head.

“Well, I’m sure my talk will get through to her. It’ll probably be okay.”

This was close to confidence. If Isshiki Iroha calculated how she would act her character, then you could also say that she was suited for negotiating. If she diligently calculated the risks and returns, then depending on what I say to her, she’d be open for bargaining.

That being the case, we had to collect bargaining chips.

No, it might be more correct to say we had to create them.

In any case, the concept was solid. Now it’s a matter of detailing out our approaches. For that, we’d need a little more information.

“Kawasaki, could you just give me some names of people who you’d think might make a good student council president?”

“Huh?”

Kawasaki pointed at herself as if she was thinking she wouldn’t be called on as and blinked in surprise. She then hesitated while moaning.

“E-Even if you tell me that so suddenly…”

“You can take it slow.”

In reality, I just wanted more time to get my thoughts in order.

“If that’s the case…”

After she said that, she tilted her head as she groaned and then she started giving out names.

“I guess Yukinoshita and Yuigahama would work. Also, Hayama, I think his name was? That guy with the obnoxious sparkling aura or whatever.”

Well, that was pretty reasonable. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were probably beginning to amass endorsements so from the idea I was thinking right now, they were an exception. But still, her image of Hayama was something like that, huh…

Kawasaki began to ponder further.

“Ebina… could probably do the job, but well, it wouldn’t fit her.”

I agreed with that as well. She was demonstrating the very value of being in that free position she was in. But for Kawasaki to bring up her name so fast meant that they had gotten pretty close huh, how earnest of her…

After that, Kawasaki went “ah” and added with a murmur.

“There’s Miura, but I don’t think it’ll work out for her.”

They’re on such bad terms. But the fact that she mentioned her name meant she was conscious of her, huh?

The names she had listed so far were conspicuous individuals in the school. They were people with popularity. This was a convincing line up.

But the next name Kawasaki brought up was unexpected.

“There’s also Sagami too, I guess…”

“Haa? Sagamii?”

I unintentionally made a scowl when I asked her back. Kawasaki made a sullen face.

“What’s with that unpleasant face of yours? You’re the one who asked.”

“No, sorry. I didn’t mean it that way to you… But, why her?”

“Because she worked as a committee chairman for the culture festival and the sports festival. It wouldn’t be weird for her to work as the student council president.”

“I see…”

I only had a completely useless image of Sagami, so it never crossed my mind. But certainly, for people who didn’t know what happened behind the scenes, Sagami Minami was someone who took up successive official positions. Putting aside the second years, surprisingly, her record might actually be a hit with the first years and third years.

This was an unthinkable dark horse. Most of all, even if I used Sagami, it wouldn’t hurt at all. In the same way, let’s include Tobe as a candidate since it wouldn’t hurt at all there too. Well, Tobe really was a good guy, huh?

Now, with this, everything should be cleared up. What was left was carefully scrutinizing how we should move forward. For now, just as I faced Kawasaki to give my thanks, she was staring at me and her lips looked like she wanted to say something. I asked her if there was anything more with a look and she added.

“Also… you as well.”

“Aah, that’d be interesting. But I can’t get thirty people to endorse me.”

“I know, just thought I’d say it.”

Kawasaki abruptly looked away. If you knew, then don't say it, gosh. Saying it like that makes my heart skip a beat, you know.

Anyway, the pieces were all mostly gathered. I verified each piece one by one.

"Hayama, Ebina-san, Miura, Sagami, and while we're at it, Tobe. Also, Isshiki. We'll have these guys become candidates."

After I declared that, Komachi made a dubious look.

"Eh? Weren't you going to have that Isshiki-san person be the candidate?"

"Yeah, in the end, that is. Well, it's basically a stalking horse, something like putting up a fight, of the sort against Isshiki."

Well, there was actually another objective beyond that, but it's probably better to explain that little by little. Komachi looked like she wouldn't be entirely convinced with just this, so I may have to do this step by step.

"Stalking horse… I wonder if there'd be anyone willing to do that… Actually, onii-chan, are you going to ask someone to do that?"

"Hahaha! Yeah right. That's why we're going to just borrow someone's name without their permission. And then we'll try to gather as much endorsements as we can."

And for that happen, there was one more person whose power I wanted to borrow.

"Totsuka, do you mind if we borrow your name?"

Totsuka blinked in puzzlement as if he wasn't expecting to get called on.

"Eh…? Even if you say that, I don't really understand…"

Totsuka squirmed as he looked down. He then looked at the corner of the floor silently for a short moment before looking at me with upturned eyes.

"…You won't do anything weird?"

"I promise."

I wouldn't do anything weird, but I might end doing something related to love instead. No, it's possible I may have done it already.

When I answered, Totsuka warmly smiled.

"…In that case, sure. You can use my name."

"Thanks."

I-In that case, I'll go ahead and use your name okay… Totsuka Hachiman sounds kind of good! It sounded like a Shinto shrine or something.

Anyhow, with this, all the pieces were assembled. Thanks to Totsuka, it felt like even the peace of my heart was included so all I could think about was how the world was all about LOVE & PEACE.

As I glowed with self-satisfaction by myself, Komachi, who was sitting next to me while thinking, spoke up.

"But even if you borrowed someone's name, if that person denies it, then we won't be able to announce that person's candidacy in the end, right?

It's just like Komachi said. As long the person in question didn't give their consent, the notice for announcing their candidacy wouldn't be complete. Since an incident like Isshiki had already happened, someone arbitrarily turning the notice in wasn't possible now.

"It's fine if they don't announce their candidacy. Rather, it's not necessary. It's sufficient enough to just get the endorsements we need."

"?"

Not only did Komachi tilt her head, but also everyone else present as well.

"What if the entire school populace gave their endorsement, what do you think would happen?"

"Well, they'd win of course."

Komachi nodded as if it was natural. I nodded back.

"Of course they'll win. Or rather, the other candidates wouldn't be able to announce their candidacy. Once you already registered your name as endorsement for someone, you wouldn't switch to another person after all."

"Hoh, to think there was that kind of conclusion… 'Above the law' or something to that effect, I see…"

Zaimokuza spoke with admiration. But it had nothing to do with whether this would be conclusive or not. Also, that Seagal movie wasn't related in any way either.

"No, I'm not sure if that's written in the protocols. But I don't think the average student is aware of these protocols anyway. But once someone gave their signature, I don't think people would be so willing to give their name to other people afterwards."

It's exactly because they didn't know the existence of the protocols that times like these were where people made their judgments according to their common sense.

If you were only allowed to endorse someone once, then collecting endorsements brings rise to another aspect.

With the exception of the simple process of eliminating weak candidates, then it would function in the preliminary election. That is, you could interpret beyond the phrase that you needed more than thirty endorsements. With this meaning, as long it was above thirty people, then it didn't matter how many names you collected.

“That’s why we’ll flood the election with applicant candidates and we’ll gather as many endorsements as the possible limit will allow us to.”

“If we can gather everyone beforehand, then other people won’t be able announce their candidacy right!”

Taishi looked at me with gleaming eyes that screamed “amazing!”. But sorry. This wasn’t as simple as it sounded.

“Well, simply put, that’s how it is, but that’s probably impossible. This was nothing more than just stalling for time. If there were a lot of candidates, then people will worry about who to endorse. If that happens, people will be hesitant to give out their signature.”

This was extremely easygoing, but for the most part, this should act as a deterrent to those two. But since this was just a simple deterrent, it wouldn’t become something decisive.

We needed one more move.

“…Hey.”

As I thought about how to deal my hand, a voice called out to me. When I looked up, Kawasaki had a serious expression. It looked like she was lightly glaring at me, but well, this was something default to her.

“Putting aside whether this will work out well or not, wouldn’t it be bad for you if you get caught using their names without their permission?”

The older sister said while the younger brother nodded in agreement.

“That’s right, onii-san’s gonna get beat to a pulp you know, to a pulp.”

“Don’t call me onii-san.”

I thought about how I would beat him to a pulp instead, but Kawasaki was sitting next to him reservedly and she was scary so I kept it to myself.

Furthermore, Komachi, who sat beside me, pulled on my sleeve again.

“Onii-chan.”

Her mouth formed an upside “v” as she groaned. I understood even if everyone didn’t say it. They probably wanted to say to not repeat the same thing again.

“I got it. I won’t put up an appearance or anything.”

There wouldn’t be any meaning otherwise.

In the first place, I was being conceited if I thought I could move the entire student population by just having their hatred directed at me. Indeed, that’s how it is. Even if I added more objectivity to it, I needed to think of a more complete method.

“Then, who’s going to do it then?”

Totsuka asked and I lowered my shoulders.

“I guess we can’t really push this onto someone else.”

I didn’t want anybody taking the full blame for anything. I didn’t want anyone to take over this position either. Besides, it’d be a problem if the place I belonged to was snatched away from me. It was really comfortable for me after all.

“That’s why we’ll have something not human do it.”

When I said that, everyone made a “huh?” face. I had better explain it step by step, huh…

“Zaimokuza.”

“Wa, no I’m, a human though?”

Zaimokuza declared himself as human while waving his hands in a fluster, clearly saying “no way, impossible, I really don’t want to do that”. His honest reaction made me smile bitterly.

“I know. I just called your name. Are you using Twitter right now?”

“Press, press, press, I possess a surface account, a back-alley account, a locked account, a different account, a policing account. I am in charge of many a things, I should say. Leave Twitter to me, why don’t you? My kin bestow upon me as the Great Teacher of computers, after all.”

What’s with that weird laugh and dialect? Also, your relatives were probably making fun of you, you know.

Anyway, if Zaimokuza was already using Twitter, then this would make things quick. As I explained how Twitter worked to the others, I would use my phone at the same time and search Twitter with an appropriate account on the internet while showing them the screen. I would explain as they looked at it.

“Twitter is basically, well, something like SNS or a mini blog of the sort. I’m not too sure about the details behind categorizing, but you can write something with 140 characters. So, there, you have these followers… basically, you can show stuff to your readers. They can reply to you, essentially responding to you, and you can have something resembling a conversation.”

Well, I’ll leave it up to them to google the rest of the details so I could proceed on.

“What makes this thing amazing is how quickly things can spread. By retweeting something, you can get the content you write to go around.”

After finishing my super rough explanation, everybody looked like they understood as if they already knew about Twitter. As expected of today’s youngsters. Well, it’s been the thing to talk about these days. Things like self-wanted posters, information leaks, or writing something outrageous and brewing up a storm. I talked as if I knew about those things.

“So, what is it that you want to do with Twitter?”

For a regular user like Zaimokuza, it was probably a boring explanation. He urged me to go on.

“We’re going to make a fake grassroots Twitter account. But we have to ensure that it feels like there’s actually someone behind it. That fictional person will collect endorsements online.”

“Fictional person…”

Komachi looked like she understood, but it didn’t feel like she did when she muttered.

I nodded to that.

As an instant temporary measure, it would break the law at most one time.

But that was the one time it could actually be used.

“Is that even possible with the rules?”

Komachi sent me a look of skepticism.

If we’re talking about the rules, then there shouldn’t be anything written about being forbidden from online campaign activities in the student council election protocols. Well, at the time when the protocols were created, the internet was nothing more than a concept and it wasn’t as developed back then.

From the start, this kind of conduct wasn’t limited at all in the protocols.

“It’s not like we’re going to actually turn in anything, so it should be fine.”

“I wonder…”

I tapped Komachi on the head as she crossed her arms while tilting her head and I continued.

“Well, if even it doesn’t work out, any complaints or criticism will be directed towards that fictional person. We can make it so this fictional person is the one who takes the full brunt of the criticism from the victimized parties; that being, the candidate who was set up and those who supported him. By doing that, they’d be able to save face too. No one will be hurt.”

A world where no one was hurt doesn’t exist.

If there was one, then it would be a world where everyone was equally hurt.

If you were already aware of how a world wouldn’t be logical if no one was hurt, but you detested the notion that someone had to be hurt, then you had to dig up a scapegoat.

You didn’t have to pick someone that existed. All you needed was an existence that would take all the heat. This was probably my one trump card I could deal. It took quite a bit of time and it was inefficient, but regardless, with this, we can get past the hurdle of no one getting hurt.

“Onii-san, you’re amazing…”

Taishi uttered his simple impressions with a slightly stiff smile.

“Hahaha, don’t praise me too much now. Also, don’t call me onii-san.”

When I told him, Kawasaki gave me a warning with a sharp tone.

“I don’t think Taishi’s praising you though.”

Eh? Really? So he was just freaked out instead?

“B-But, that’d be nice if that worked out.”

Totsuka spoke up as if smoothing over the conversation. But Komachi sighed and looked at me with reproachful eyes.

“Well, it’s fine if it does work out…”

Usually when I say these kinds of things, Komachi would reply in a crisp manner, but her reaction had been rather slow since a while ago. That bothered me and I asked her.

“Is this idea no good?”

“Mmm, it’s not that it’s no good… But whether it’s good for onii-chan or not… I’m not really sure.”

Komachi dropped her eyes and spoke fretfully. It looked like Komachi herself couldn’t properly explain it.

Well, even I thought it was an underhanded, cowardly even, method.

“But we won’t know unless we try. There existed no other alternative as well.”

It was as Zaimokuza said. Our hands were limited. On top of that, we had tossed aside the hands that didn’t exist from the start. The duel of the strongest duelists was already inevitable. Even the duelists themselves were the ones who created the act of drawing cards. That’s what it was.

“So, how shall we proceed with this? We can indeed make an account, but just doing that won’t give us an increase in followers and we won’t even get any retweets either.”

“We’ll follow students from our school one after the other. If we find one person to follow the account, then others will come by in succession. And also… if fellow students follow each other, there’d be pressure there. It’d be particularly more obvious for the girls.”

When I explained, Zaimokuza slapped his knees.

“So that’s the game you’re going after. I see your point for the most part. If you replied as a form of greeting indicating you are from the same school, you would be requesting them to follow you. Correct?”

As expected of the Great Teacher of computers. You were very knowledgeable of things.

When you exchanged tweets with fellow students from the same school, then you couldn't help, but have this realistic feeling of obligation. If someone said they were from the same school and followed you, human empathy would cause you to think "it'd be bad if I didn't return the follow, huh…" even if you didn't know the person directly. If they followed the fake Twitter account, then the tweets from this account would show up on their timeline.

"So, the user name and the tweeted content would be something like this."

I took out a ball pen from my bag and I wrote on the borrowed napkin from the table as it rustled.

USERNAME: __-san Grassroots Account

[Sobu High School Only] This person will become the student council president! Currently, we're looking for people to endorse him for support! People who enter their names in the list of # endorsements should retweet [Spread the Word]

As I checked with my phone, I made a model slogan like that.

"Basically, we just have to repost this at fixed intervals and build up retweets. People who retweeted will have their names entered into the list."

We also had to think about the profile for the account. The difficult part was how we should consider presenting information. It shouldn't be too specific, but that said, we had to aim for something that would at least make someone believe there was someone behind it. Having to create a number of things was a real pain…

For the moment, everyone was examining the model slogan and the actual tweet. Having multiple people check over something would increase precision. I was glad there were a lot of people at a time like this.

Eventually, Taishi, who was looking it over, raised his hand.

"If the candidates saw it, what are you going to do if they tried to deny it?"

I see. It was plausible that the person in question might see it… I thought for a moment and spoke up.

"We can do something like this. We can include in the content "It's still a secret from the actual person, okay! ♪Sparkle, Kapun♪". And besides, the support of those willing should be good enough."

Following Taishi was Totsuka who raised his hand as he looked at my smartphone. Yes, Totsuka-kun.

"Hachiman, isn't this everybody's username? It doesn't look like it's their real name, is that okay?"

"Yeah. It's fine if people want to expose their real name, but even if they don't, that's fine too."

When I said that, Kawasaki looked at me with an apathetic look.

“There’s no way anyone would do that.”

Oh my, Kawasaki-san, your guard was surprisingly tough, huh? I don’t particular hate girls like you, you see. After all, my guard’s super tough as well. It’s important to be modest.

Even I wasn’t stupid enough to give my real name when suddenly asked for it. I knew that point.

“Well, to be honest, even a pseudonym would work too. It’s not an official endorsement list after all. We’re not turning it in anyway, so it won’t go public. It’ll make people conscious of who to vote for and we’d even be lucky if people start to think they had to endorse someone else.”

“Is that good enough?”

Komachi asked surprisingly. I nodded.

“This will have the best utility value for negotiations.”

“Negotiations…”

Komachi murmured quietly. Well, I might’ve said that a bit too stiffly there.

The true nature of this fake account existed there.

The risk hedge of putting a figurehead that didn’t exist under the rug and the controlling of the endorsements that backed Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. These were just secondary objectives.

The collected achievements of this account. That was the most important thing.

These achievements would act as the bargaining chip for Isshiki.

And then that Isshiki Iroha would become the bargaining chip afterwards.

After getting everyone’s opinion and laying out the concerning points, most of the uneasy components were gone.

Now the remaining problem was who would go about doing the deed…

Well, that’d be me and Zaimokuza.

“Zaimokuza, can I ask you to do half of the work with the accounts?”

“Very well.”

Zaimokuza nihilistically laugh. When it came to doing something of your specialty, you get awfully confident, don’t you? That confidence made it scary instead. That’s why I decided to give a warning just in case.

“Try to avoid at least getting our true identity found out. You just need to fool them for these three days.”

“Leave it to me. Long ago, there were moments of fear that had enveloped me when I tried to break past an IP.”

You had that kind of past… Well, if he was scared at some point, then he probably wouldn’t mess up badly here.

As I thought that we’d be able to get started with this, Kawasaki tapped the table. What, was that Morse code? Or so I thought as it looked like she was calling me. You could at least just call my name. Or could it be that you didn’t remember my name? Kawawhatever-san was so super cruel!

“What is it?”

I asked her and Kawasaki glanced at Zaimokuza and spoke with a low voice.

“Can *tha*t even write like a girl?”

“Should be fine. That’s Zaimokuza’s specialty after all.”

When I said that, Zaimokuza gave a thumbs-up with a bingo☆ and a wink.

“Indeed, leave it to my literary talent!”

“That’s not it… Find an appropriate account, copy and paste their sentences with some alterations or at least try to copy their style. That’s your specialty, right?”

“That’s what I thought, I dare say, nin-nin.”

Zaimokuza suddenly laughed with a hint of self-deprecation. Well, that’s a pretty important talent to have, so take care of it okay?

But still, we were past the first stage. I took a sip of my coffee that was already cold. Everyone let out a sigh and the atmosphere became warm.

In that group was just one person who had a depressed face, Komachi.

“What’s wrong, Komachi?”

I asked Komachi with a quiet voice that only she could hear. When I did, Komachi answered again with a fleeting voice.

“Will this really work out?”

“It will. I’ll make sure I get the finishing touches until the end. Leave it to me.”

“Okay…”

She answered, but Komachi continued to look down.

She cupped her head with her hands and lightly tapped.

“Onii-chan, make sure to properly talk things out with Yukino-san and Yui-san, okay? Promise?”

Komachi squeezed my hands as she spoke.

“Yeah, I will. But there’s nothing we can do with a story that isn’t convincing enough. I’ll talk to them after I prepare that.”

“Onii-chan can be really reasonable, but I’m really worried that you’ll just blow a lot of things off…”

“It’s fine.”

I’ll do something about it.

It really was a roundabout method, but if it was the only way that could satisfy the conditions, then it was the only thing I could go with.

I had my reason, I posed the problem, and now I had the solution.

The only thing left was putting everything into action.

Chapter 8

Hikigaya Hachiman waits for an opportunity and speaks.

It was late at night. I was checking over all the fake accounts I was left in charge with operating on my home's PC.

In the approximate three days since I had been operating these accounts, I spent most of my time tweeting while making various needed preparations.

But as expected, not all of the students at school used Twitter and there were also those who had no interest in the student council election as well. There were dead accounts and there were many who ignored us. There were also days along the way where the number of retweets would stagger. That was when we created a new Hayama Grassroots account as a preventive measure.

Although we fell short from the 1200 students that populated the school, we were able to break past the targeted number with the help of this new account. This was truly thanks to our gracious savior, Hayama.

With this, I could finally talk with Isshiki Iroha and then that would prepare me for talking with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama after that. We were able to fabricate persuasive bargaining chips that could serve as negotiation material.

But from here on were the final finishing touches.

With the PC left on, I reached for my cellphone.

As I wondered about whether I had his number in my phone, I looked at my contacts list and as I thought, his number wasn't registered.

"Aaah…"

That reminded me. Did I not register it because I thought I was probably never going to use the phone? Or maybe I erased it instead…? My memories about those things were fuzzy.

Ah, it might be in my call history.

With that realization, I decided to check my history. The history consisted most of Komachi, but when I scrolled up to just around the time of the Culture Festival, there was an unfamiliar phone number. Aah, I did call him that one time, didn't I…?

Although it was just a multipurpose alarm clock, I had to give it some praise just for having the cellphone function of having a call history that didn't easily disappear.

I called that number displayed in the history.

The other party picked up before even one ring could go off.

“It is I.”

Only one person would pick up the phone and respond that way.

“Is this Zaimokuza?”

“Indeed, what is your business with me? I am currently engrossed with a cellphone game, so I hope you could make this quick.”

Right, so that’s why he picked up the call in one ring. I thought for sure he was waiting on standby the entire time for me to call him, so that gave me quite the scare. Well, I didn’t want to take too much of his time. Let’s make this quick.

“Sorry. I just had a little favor regarding the Twitter accounts.”

“Humu?”

I couldn’t distinguish his unintelligible response between “yes” or “no”. Not minding it, I told him what my business was.

It wasn’t anything difficult and important. It was to just change some settings.

Of course, even if the proclaimed Great Teacher of computers Zaimokuza had overheard this, he wouldn’t say no. But the words he responded with very really incomprehensible.

“Nfuu, indeed, settings of that level can be easily changed at any moment, but…”

“Then I’ll leave it to you to manage the accounts you’re in charge of. I’ll do the ones I have.”

“That is not a problem, but… Hachiman, is that fine with you?”

He had a considerate tone towards me which was rare for even Zaimokuza. But I asked him back with as much composure as possible.

“What is?”

“….This is not a method that is very deserving of praise… You are treading over dangerous waters.”

After a few seconds of silence, Zaimokuza solemnly spoke. Despite his ridiculous choice of words, I could feel a sense of sincerity soaked in the respiration that escaped the speakers of the smartphone.

As I pondered about how I should respond to him, what followed next was an awfully loud voice.

“But hold it. Do not get the wrong idea. It is not that I am concerned about you, but I am merely uneasy at the prospect that the responsibility may fall onto my hands and furthermore, I worry that I may be the one to carry the blame in your place. But I will state now that I have done my preparations to expose us both should that come to pass.”

“You’re one refreshing scumbag, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Whether he was saying that seriously or whether he was trying to give indirect advice, he was really hard to understand.

“Don’t worry. The only ones aware of the true identity behind these accounts are just us. Even if they did find out, the person behind these accounts doesn’t exist. No one will get hurt.”

“I suppose that may be fine…”

I decided to give some wonderful words to Zaimokuza who was still seemingly doubtful.

“Did you know, Zaimokuza…? As long as you didn’t make a problem out of the problem, it won’t become one.”

“…A scum to the end, Hachiman.”

He told me earnestly.

“I don’t want to hear that from you. Anyways, I’m counting on you.”

“Hmph. I have no other choice then. I ask you of the same to not make it really my fault as well! Like really!”

“I get it already… See you.”

I replied and hung up without waiting for his response. He sounded like he was screaming at the end there, wasn’t he…?

But Zaimokuza’s anxiety was needless. No matter how things turned out, I wouldn’t make it his fault.

When I refreshed my browser, I was able to confirm the changes Zaimokuza had made to the settings of the account.

What was left was just printing these out.

There was a lull as the things were printing. I collapsed onto the sofa and looked at the ceiling.

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The dawn of Friday. It was the day of the decisive battle.

Then again, it wasn’t like today was the day of the final ballot. In fact, it’s so that it wouldn’t turn out that way. Today was the day in order not to fight. That’s why instead of a decisive battle, it’d be more correct to say a decisive conclusion.

But I could only spout out those cool words up until third period. Once it was fourth period, I couldn’t keep myself from staying cool.

Waiting for me after this was a gamble.

The only thing I could think of during fourth period was how I could increase the likelihood of success. No, “thinking” might not have been the right way to

phrase it. I was repeatedly thinking of word plays and logic puzzles to melt away the tension.

The time of restlessness continued. Whenever I glanced at the clock, the minutes of the hour would bother me.

Eventually, that ended as well. Class was over and I left the class simultaneously with the ringing of the chime. I also brought along with me the clear file that I prepared yesterday without forgetting it.

My destination was class 1-C. It was the class Isshiki Iroha was in.

I had no idea what Isshiki's moving tendencies were. I also had no idea where she'd be during lunch. That's why, to catch her, the only possible timing was immediately after the end of class.

I reenacted various simulations such as how I would go about calling out to her or how I would ask somebody to call her out for me. It should be fine. I made sure to practice in front of the bathroom mirror at home, so there shouldn't be any problems, I think… I'm kind of worried…

But as I was submerged in my thoughts, I had already arrived at class C.

I stealthily peeked into the classroom from the open door. Just doing this alone gave me vibes of a suspicious intruder. People gave me furtive glances as if it was rare for visitors from other years to come here… Before I get reported, I better finish this quick!

When I looked around the classroom, Isshiki was just about to eat lunch with several friends in the back of the classroom near the window… Looks like I'll have to ask someone to call her for me. No problem, no problem, I did do all that practice after all… Hachiman, do your best! (VA: Totsuka Saika). Alright, I can do it.

Near the entrance were three boys with glasses. I called out to that group.

"Excuse me… Do you have a minute?"

In trying to keep myself from sounding excited, a strange, deep voice came out instead.

"Y-Yes…"

Although it was just one person who replied, the other two whispered to each other and took a consulting posture. Well, that's reasonable of them. I'll go ahead and breakthrough without paying any attention to it.

"Can you call Isshiki-san for me?"

"Haa…"

He gave me a half-hearted reply, but after a quick moment of reluctance, the boy went to go call Isshiki. When he called Isshiki, she nimbly looked in my

direction. And in that next moment, she had a slightly disappointed expression. Sorry for it being me.

Isshiki cheerfully approached me. She made a proper smile then.

“Senpai, what’s wrooong~?”

“I want your help with something regarding the student council election case.”

After saying that, Isshiki huddled herself in an apologetic manner.

“Haa… Will it be bad if we leave it for after school~? Um, lunch is…”

I knew in advance she was definitely going to reject, so it was an answer I expected. That’s why I emphasized my hesitant eyes and retaliated with a grave voice.

“It’ll be super bad.”

“Super bad, huuuh…”

Isshiki crossed her arms for a little bit and groaned. Eventually, she looked like she made up her mind.

“Okaaay. Please wait a moment then~.”

After saying that, she skipped her way back to her desk, gathered up her bento, and hopped her way back to me.

“So, what will we be doing?”

“Can you come with me to the library? I need you to fill out some paper work.”

“Haa… Well, guess I’ll have to~.”

In just that instant, she made an incredibly, unpleasant expression…

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The library during lunch was dead silent. In the first place, there weren’t many who used it during lunch and especially since it had a rather bleak atmosphere to it during this time of the season.

In the corner of such a quiet library was a rather audible sigh.

The origin of that was right before my eyes.

“Haa..”

Once again, she let out a deep, flaunty sigh. And then, Isshiki glanced at me.

“Senpaaai, does it have to be me that does this~?”

“Well, look, you don’t want to be the president, right… Also, there isn’t anyone else that would help me with this, so while we have time, we should do this one by one…”

When I replied, Isshiki made a puffy, sullen look. You sure are pushy…

"…Well, I guess so. But writing these down is really hard you knooow."

What I asked Isshiki to do was transcribe all the names of the retweets gathered on the fake accounts printed into a listing onto the directory list of endorsements. What a pain…

But transcribing names really was a simple and boring job. I thought that as well while working with her.

Thanks to that, for how boring it was, Isshiki would tip it over with idle chatter. Or maybe it was a defensive measure against how awkward it was to be with me so she figured she had to talk to take control. So it wasn't like she was having fun talking to me.

Well, seeing that the speed that we were writing had dropped, it wasn't that bad of a tendency.

"Ah, by the way, was that person you went to fool around with Hayama's girlfriend?"

"I wonder."

"Eeeh, it wouldn't hurt to tell me, riiight?"

"After this is done, sure."

"Well, but, if it's something of that level, I don't think it'll be that much of a problem. So it should be okay…"

Those were some scary final words she snuck in at the end there… If she was in front of Hayama instead, she probably wouldn't behave like this. In many cases, there were a lot of times when a woman who showed an opening to another man was simply because they were not targets for their affection and just letting their guard down instead of actually inviting them (self research). Then there were also many other cases where it wasn't so much the case that the woman had feelings for the guy because she was acting alert, but rather, she, in fact, just hated the guy instead (self research).

Isshiki continued her chatter to tide over the boredom.

"But like, senpai, you got along with Hayama-senpai?"

"Nope, not at all. That was just a coincidence. I was told by my senpai to be his escort, that's all."

"Ah, then, senpai, let's go out and have fun together. We'll invite Hayama-senpai too and go together."

"No, I'm not going to go…"

Exactly how many times were people going to use me as an excuse to go somewhere? It wouldn't be weird for me to be laid out with kombu and skipjack tuna at this rate.

Still, this was convenient for me since I was going to start up a conversation by bringing up Hayama eventually. With the conversation heading in that direction, it'd make it easier to ask things.

"You know, about Hayama… what do you think of him?"

I reflexively asked in a vague way. For the innocent young maiden Hikigaya Hachiman, it was just a tad bit too embarrassing to say the words "like". As if the way I vaguely asked was realistically creepy, Isshiki's mouth hung open and she lowered her head in a fluster.

"Huh? W-What are you doing? Are you making passes at me? I'm sorry, it won't work out. There's someone I like."

The way she rejected was incredibly natural. Instant kill… What is this girl, Ramen Man[1]? I haven't even started fighting yet…

"That's not it… I'm simply asking you what you thought about him."

"Mmm, what do I think huh~? As far as I'm concerned, he's very up my alley, you see."

"Aah, right, up your alley huh, alley…"

"I just think it'd be kinda good so for now I'd make a mov…, I'd want to try holding hands or something, you seeee."

She was just about to say "make a move" didn't she…? This sneaky bitch…

But I managed to ask what I wanted to ask.

With this, now I could confidently begin negotiating with Isshiki Iroha.

Up until this moment, I couldn't get a grasp of the person called Isshiki Iroha. We only knew each other for a short while so that was a reason as well, but the primary factor was how vastly different our positions and environments were. Above all else, I couldn't see the core that made this girl.

But I was able to gather all the pieces I needed. And those pieces were in the conversations I had with Isshiki up until now and in the life I lived up until now.

Isshiki had a sly part to her that would skillfully use her immaturity and innocence to her advantage. That was a part that resembled my little sister, Hikigaya Komachi. However, her cuteness and charm was lacking. Therefore, I could conclude that Isshiki Iroha was an example of an absolutely uncute Komachi.

As far as outer appearances and scheming were concerned, Yukinoshita Haruno came to mind. But she fell absolutely short of her. Therefore, Isshiki Iroha could be said to be an inferior Haruno-san.

That fluffy aura of hers. That resembled closely to Meguri-senpai, but fundamentally, they were different creatures. Therefore, Isshiki Iroha was a phony Meguri.

That desire to be pampered was probably very similar to Sagami. But unlike Sagami, she was much more skillful. Therefore, Isshiki Iroha was something like a super amplified Sagami.

I also thought that how she made a character for herself and behaved in a way to preserve that was very similar to Orimoto Kaori. Therefore, Isshiki Iroha was a different type of Orimoto.

With the above models in mind, I should be able to derive tendencies and countermeasures towards Isshiki Iroha.

It wasn't that she had a reckless amount of pride. She would take care to flatter someone when it was necessary and she would do it in a way so that she could be loved forever. However, she would be careful to not damage her own advertising and wouldn't sell herself short. With all that's been said, all she wanted to do was protect her brand image.

That's exactly why she didn't like the very idea of the vote of confidence. The vote of confidence was a system that she was afraid would damage her brand image. Winning a blatant fight wasn't anything bad. And appearing in something like that wouldn't raise her stock at all.

Her train of thought might have been very similar to that of a manager in charge of a conservatively stubborn enterprise.

If that was the case, then she and I could discuss things on a business wavelength.

As I stayed silent, Isshiki spoke with a fawning voice as if bored again.

"Heeey~, senpaaai, is there really any meaning in doing this? Even going through the trouble of hand writing everything…"

"Well, it's not like there is or isn't…"

"You're being very vague…"

Isshiki looked at me with moist eyes.

"Well even if you did do all the work here, either Yukinoshita or Yuigahama is going to win anyway. In that sense, this is pointless… Whatever you do Isshiki, you can't win against those two."

"Eeeh, isn't that kind of meaaan? But well, it's not like it matters if I lose though."

Isshiki took it as a joke and laughed it off as she spoke. I responded very seriously and honestly.

"You don't need to worry. You definitely can't win. I promise you that."

When I did, Isshiki's brow shook for an instant.

"I-I know right~. Buut, it'd be kinda freaky if I somehow won or something."

I shook my head at Isshiki's words and continued the conversation in disinterest.

"The one doing Yukinoshita's campaign speech is Hayama too."

"Aah, I see."

"Yuigahama has Miura."

"Aah, Miura-senpai…"

How she responded to that name made it easier for me. I was aware of the grudge that existed between Isshiki and Miura. I was expecting for her to get agitated and I continued further along.

"Also, Yuigahama gets along pretty well with Hayama and he and Yukinoshita are childhood friends."

"Right… Huh? Childhood friends?"

Isshiki obviously looked like she didn't know about that as she let out an overbearing voice at the end.

"You can understand just by looking at them, but those guys are those kinds of people. You can't win at anything against them."

"Haa, sure…"

Isshiki responded with a sigh and a groan. As for my personal thoughts.

Without a doubt, there probably wasn't a girl more amazing than those guys. Even if you looked anywhere else.

Noticing that Isshiki talked less and less, I pressed on further.

"Also, I'm sure even the people who endorsed you at first wouldn't vote for you either, Isshiki."

"Haa…"

"They're probably all laughing out loud right now too. And once they see you lose, they'll laugh even harder."

"…"

This time, Isshiki didn't respond. Even so, I selfishly continued to blabber on.

"That kind of stuff really pisses you off, huh?"

The lead of the mechanical pencil snapped. There were no other sounds and only my voice echoed.

"Even if they were being conspicuous about it, they probably didn't think it'd matter regardless of what you say to them. They're just horsing around, making a joke out of it, and just wanted to tease you after all."

Isshiki's hands stopped. Her gaze was directed at the pencil at her hand.

"I guess if you're going to get done in, it'd be nice to get them back too…"

"…Haa, well, that'd be nice if we could do that."

Those words were spat out with a sigh. I returned it with honesty.

"We can."

Isshiki's shoulders twitched. Seeing that, I slowly spoke in earnest.

"The reason those guys are acting like that is because they want to look down on you; to cause you discomfort. In that case, all you needed to do was turn the tables around. Come up with a result that will make them as mad as possible."

If by chance. If by chance, as a girl, half of the girl population was her enemy. And if by chance, Isshiki Iroha truly liked Hayama Hayato.

I had to gamble on those. I had to gamble on the pride Isshiki Iroha had as a girl.

"Yukinoshita backed by Hayama and Yuigahama backed by Miura. Don't you want to try winning against those two?"

Isshiki raised her head in response to those words.

But she quickly showed her superficial, business smile once again.

"But I can't win right? Well, winning would be a problem in itself though~."

I thought Isshiki Iroha was a rather clever girl. She understood her own worth and conducted herself in a way that people would acknowledge her. As she did that, her attitude would be combined with slyness.

And on top of that cunningness of hers, she came to understand the difference between herself and the two, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. If I could unfasten those shacklers of hers, then she wouldn't run away from those two.

"What do you think I've been having you write since earlier?"

"A directory list of endorsements, isn't it?"

"That's right… Except it's a directory list of endorsements for Isshiki Iroha."

"Haa? Ah… Fueh?"

You don't need to say it over again (good conscience).

I grabbed a different list from the clear file.

On it was all of the retweets printed from the "Isshiki Iroha Grassroots Account". I laid out each sheet one by one before Isshiki.

"Ummm, I already got my list of endorsements though…"

"The requirement was to get more than thirty endorsements. You can, however, get as much as you want."

Isshiki grabbed a printout and looked hard at it. There, I told her.

"Just a little over 400. That's the number of supporters for Isshiki Iroha."

"…"

Was she taking the time to calculate everything? That is, the meaning that that number had. Eventually, Isshiki realized something and frantically let go of the piece of paper.

"E-Even if you tell me that all of a sudden, I can't do it! I-I mean, I haven't even thought about anything for the speech either."

"Do you still have that piece of paper written with what Yukinoshita said for the platform?"

I suddenly brought that up and Isshiki answered in confusion.

"Huh? Ah, I think so."

"Good, we'll go with that."

Isshiki then groaned as she pondered deeply and then spoke.

"Then, aren't I just a puppet? Or something like that?"

"No, you won't become one."

When I answered, Isshiki tilted her head with doubt. Unintentionally, an unpleasant, broad grin spilled out from my face.

"The reason is because you won't actually go about implementing any of it. You can't call someone a puppet if they don't do as they are told. There isn't anyone who would try to protect the platform let alone expect anything out of it."

"Isn't that worse than a puppet?"

Isshiki spoke with shock. But she quickly withdrew that shocked smile.

"…You know, even if I become the president, I don't think I could do it~. I don't have any confidence or something. I also have club too…"

Isshiki's uncertainty was natural.

If she carelessly decided to become the student council president here and ended up failing, her brand image would get worse. She was weighing the risks and returns and they were swaying from one end to the other.

That's why it was necessary to change those risks, those demerits, so that they would become merits to her.

"Well, certainly, shuffling both would be pretty tough… But if you pull through, the returns would be huge. What do you think those would be?"

"Haa…? Well, maybe something like experience, or something like confidential reports or something. But you know senpai, you're acting like a teacher right now."

Isshiki looked at me with apathetic eyes. I could feel her telling me that she didn't need the boring lecture.

But I couldn't have her underestimating me now.

"…Nope, you got it wrong. What you'd get would be 'I'm a courageous person for doing club activities at the same time as doing something as hard as the student council president!'"

I tried to say it as adorably as I could, but "whoa…" was the only thing Isshiki murmured… what was that? Was it unnecessary because the title was already long enough as it is?

But after I cleared my throat, the words that followed after got a proper reaction from Isshiki.

"Since you're a first year, there are things you would be forgiven for even if you failed at them. There isn't that much of a difference as far as ability's concerned between first and second years."

When I spoke, Isshiki quickly looked at my face. After confirming that our eyes were in contact, I went for one more push.

"And since you were doing both things at once, you can easily use club as an excuse to get away from the student council. The opposite applies as well… These two advantages are something only you would have."

"B-But, hard things are hard things sooo~… or something."

Isshiki restlessly moved her shoulders. This was the most positive reaction so far.

As Isshiki said earlier, if she became the president at this rate, she'd be nothing, but a puppet. No, she'd be something lower. Isshiki probably couldn't do anything by herself. But that could very well be the reason why she would be suitable as the president. Because she would need help and protection, she would be viable to ask for help from various people including Hayama. By doing this, she could get them to favor her and this would be the ultimate merit for her. If I was going to be straightforward to her about explaining this, this would be how it'd come out.

"Times like those are when you can consult with Hayama. If you want, you can get him to help you too. He'll basically be attending to you for the whole year. You could even talk to him over lunch after club or something and even have him send you home too."

After I laid everything out in one breath, Isshiki blinked in surprise.

"…Senpai, could it be that you're really smart?"

"Pretty much."

But in exchange, I was malicious with a bad personality.

Isshiki suddenly let out a sigh that was a cross between a bitter smile and a regular smile.

“Well… If I’m getting this much support, I guess it can’t be helped~. And your suggestion is pretty charming as well… And I’m not too fond of my classmates laughing at me from behind too…”

Isshiki cut off her words there and showed an extraordinarily malicious smile.

“I’ll get on board with you, senpai.”

It was a mysterious thing.

I couldn’t help but think that this smile was much cuter.

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I slowly walked down the hallway of the special building. It had been only a few days at most, yet the scenery felt awfully nostalgic.

The rustling noise after school, the commotion of the students, the voices of the clubs from outside, and the echoing of the brass band. Eventually they’d all feel nostalgic at some point.

I stood before the door to the club and placed my hands on it. The door seemed to be unlocked. And the girls seemed to be inside already. I took a small breath and entered the room.

The small fragrance of black tea filled the room.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama sat at their usual seats. However, they weren’t speaking.

Typically, Yukinoshita would be sitting and reading her book, but today she was sitting up straight silently. Next to her was Yuigahama who wasn’t fiddling with her cellphone and instead was peeking at Yukinoshita awkwardly.

It was reasonable.

Rumors of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama announcing their candidacy were already running throughout the school. There were people who were talking about it on Twitter which I was observing.

Yukinoshita, of course, should have been well aware of Yuigahama’s running for candidacy. That’s why Yuigahama was fumbling over what to say to her.

However, that too would end today and at this very moment only.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

I spoke, pulled my chair out, and sat at my usual seat.

Yukinoshita’s expression was stern up until she looked at me to which she spoke up.

“It’s quite rare for you to go through the trouble of calling us.”

“No, I figured I’d try to get our conclusions out on the table.”

When I said that, Yukinoshita made a slightly surprised expression and she then softly dropped her gaze. She repeated my words slowly as if she was thinking.

“Our conclusion…?”

“Yeah.”

When I glanced at Yuigahama, she was looking at me quietly. She was waiting for my words.

“Our methods may be different individually, but as a club, we should have a conclusion. Especially in a case like this where there’s only one chance.”

The student council election would happen only once. Trial and error wasn’t allowed. It was only during that time and moment that there existed a chance. As long as you weren’t allowed to test things over and over, it’d be better to be unified at the end.

“You guys won’t change your mind?”

Although I knew what their answer would be, I wanted to make sure at the very end.

Yukinoshita directly looked at me with a stern glint in her eyes and answered immediately.

“I won’t. This is the best way.”

Her unmoving and striking tone pierced through me directly.

That forceful intensity caused me to choke on my voice. The room grew silent.

In the silence was a small voice that was also soaked with emotion.

“…I won’t either.”

Yuigahama quietly stared at the desk, never looking at either of us. Her attitude emitted a resolute mood that filled the room and Yukinoshita bit her lips.

“Yuigahama-san, there isn’t a need for you to participate…”

“I will. And I don’t plan on losing.”

Her quiet voice was stubborn without the slightest hint of withdrawing. As usual, Yuigahama was facing downwards so I couldn’t read her expression. Yukinoshita questioned the downwards facing Yuigahama from the side with a strained, but quiet voice. Her expression that looked like she was looking at something heartbreaking appeared lonely. Even in those narrowed eyes of hers, there was sadness somewhere as well.

“Why even you as well…”

“…Because if Yukinon’s gone, then we’ll lose it… I don’t want that.”

Yuigahama answered with a shaking voice. Yukinoshita slowly spoke as if remonstrating that.

“I already said it before. That won’t happen. That’s why it shouldn’t be necessary for you to participate.”

“But…!”

Yuigahama raised her head as she was about to object. But when she faced Yukinoshita directly, she lost the words to continue on further.

I took over where she left off.

“In truth, there really isn’t a need to participate in the election… Not just Yuigahama, but you as well, Yukinoshita.”

“…What do you mean?”

Yukinoshita looked at me, finding fault with what I said. Her eyes sharply narrowed.

“I believe I already rejected your suggestion.”

That’s right. Yukinoshita thoroughly rejected my proposal. I was just being conceited if I thought something I did would lead to something. And then, Hayama was the one who told me how other people would force their own selfish opinion on me based on how they saw me regardless of what my intentions were. But there were also people who noticed for me that that wasn’t all there was to it.

“…Yeah. That’s why I’m not talking about that one. That kind of stuff… I’m not doing it anymore.”

Truthfully, it should be different from my methods up until now. I used a risk hedge that took a lot more effort than before. And the imposed conditions were cleared.

“…”

Yukinoshita looked slightly confused as she went silent. She was probably thinking that it was surprising for me to unexpectedly back down.

“So… why is it okay for us to not participate?”

Yuigahama asked timidly. She looked at me, worried about what I might say. But my answer was extremely normal. It wasn’t anything important.

“Isshiki is willing to run for the student council president now. That’s why the request itself doesn’t exist anymore.”

After saying that, Yukinoshita as well as Yuigahama looked dumbfounded. And then Yukinoshita spoke with suspicion.

“Why so suddenly…?”

“Rather than suddenly, the premise was just wrong in the first place.”

It wasn’t only my approach that was wrong, but Yukinoshita’s and Yuigahama’s as well.

For someone who wasn’t motivated, you simply had to make him stop. That was one way to do it.

But there was another way. And that was to motivate them. The problem itself would disappear in its entirety.

“It’s not that Isshiki didn’t want to be the student council president. What she didn’t like was being elected as the unsightly student council president who won a vote of confidence in an election where it was obvious who would win.”

People who didn’t listen to others and cooked up their own success stories inside of themselves. There were people who wouldn’t consent to their story if it wasn’t followed to a tee.

In the same way, there were people who tried to preserve the character that they painstakingly created.

Isshiki just didn’t want to act in a detrimental way that would lower her own worth. That’s why you just had to do away with that demerit and change it into a merit instead.

“That’s why if you cleared all those conditions, then she’ll become the student council president.”

Yuigahama looked confused as she listened to my story and voiced a question.

“B-But, if we don’t participate, then isn’t it just going to become a vote of confidence in the end?”

“Yeah. It will. But if the vote of confidence had value to it, that’s fine. It’s a different story if it didn’t damage Isshiki Iroha’s brand image.”

The two looked at me as if they weren’t convinced and shot me stares asking me to explain.

But it’d be faster to present detailed examples than orally explain it to them. I grabbed my bag.

“That’s why I searched for that value.”

I then pulled out a clear file.

The content was the same as what I showed Isshiki. It was a printed list of names of people who retweeted the posts from the account managed by a fictional person.

“What’s this?”

Yuigahama grabbed one sheet of paper and asked.

“It’s an active grassroots account on Twitter. Well, it’s not just for Isshiki as there are other accounts for other people as well.”

I couldn’t help but be impressed with myself for saying something so natural considering I was the one who did all the work. But I didn’t utter a single lie.

Yukinoshita looked over the printouts and murmured with confusion.

“Collection of endorsements on the internet…”

“That’s not all. Most of the retweets in that list were primarily for Isshiki.”

“So it’ll turn into a substantial primary election…”

I nodded to Yukinoshita’s mutter.

While it may be on Twitter, it being on there would cause rumors to start. The fact that there were other candidates in the running would influence the substantial primary election and getting people to be conscious that they were the ones who supported them as runners of candidates was good. Even if it didn’t work out as smoothly as that, as long as it could satisfy Isshiki’s ego and even be the primary reason for her to move, then that was fine.

Yukinoshita looked through page after page and quickly scanned over the lists. After that, she let out a long sigh.

“I see, so this is… This explains why everyone wasn’t very interested when I spoke to them about endorsements…”

It was possible that the people Yukinoshita talked to didn’t belong to the group of people who retweeted. But the chain of tweets recruiting endorsements should have wiggled their way into their thought processes.

By preparing numerous choices for them, they would start to hesitate.

Even if the time they spent to hesitate decreased from one person to the next, there would be a huge time loss should that kind of atmosphere become rampant. Just like how one vehicle breaking could cause a traffic jam on the highway,

There were sounds of rustling paper.

Yukinoshita held the printout before me and asked. Wrinkles formed on that piece of paper as she gripped it tightly.

“…Did you do this?”

“It’s probably a volunteer. I don’t know who it is though.”

“…I see.”

Yukinoshita didn’t ask any further.

She probably realized it’d be pointless in doing so. I wouldn’t say anything and even if you tried to look it up, the information on the accounts didn’t have any personal details to go on.

“This is an amazing amount, isn’t it?”

Yuigahama spoke in a daze.

“Yeah. It’s quite a lot. It’s around 400 or so.”

As I answered, I glanced at the “Isshiki Iroha Grassroots Account” printout.

Hayama, Miura, Ebina-san, Isshiki, Totsuka, Sagami, Tobe, and the secondly added Hayama grassroots account. The accumulated total of all the retweets of the periodic posts from all eight accounts surpassed 400. And Hayama was the most

overwhelming. If you calculated at most one post for twenty tweets over all eight accounts, then this number would hold.

Right. The number that all all the accounts summed up to were 400.

Therefore, it wasn't a number that only Isshiki had.

In the first place, the number of Twitter users at Sobu High was limited and it would be impossible for Isshiki Iroha to amass that kind of support.

That's why there was one lie here.

You couldn't change your username on Twitter from English, but you could change the profile name to Japanese.

The displayed Japanese profile name and the thumbnail image of all eight operated accounts were changed last night to "Isshiki Iroha Grassroots Account".

Whoever it was and whether he existed or not, the person behind the account had changed it.

If you looked carefully, you'd immediately see the difference in the English username. But the English was organized with vocabulary like "kaicyou" and "ouen" which were things they wouldn't make a personal correlation with. That's why you could give any number of explanations.

Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were looking at that printout.

If you actually looked carefully, you'd see that those accounts were duplicates. Of course, there were tons of pseudonyms as well.

It was just a simple bluff.

But as long as I could get through this today and this very moment, then that was good enough.

Yuigahama put the printout on the desk and quietly reached for her cellphone.

That posture of hers gave me the chills. Could she be confirming it on the internet?

But Yuigahama's hands stopped there. As if she gave up on the idea, she only touched the phone and returned it to its original spot.

Just in case, the names of the accounts were left as they were. That's why even if you checked now, the content should be the same as what's printed on the sheets.

But this was a risky maneuver as long as the fake account had followers.

But a special characteristic of Twitter was that as long as you didn't submit anything, nothing would appear on the timelines of your followers.

Because there wasn't a single post all day today, the name change for the fake accounts shouldn't have been noticed by the followers. And also, their timelines continued to be updated with new submissions even now. Thanks to that, the posts

of the fake accounts continued to drop to the bottom until its entire existence was erased.

Of course, there may have been some followers who noticed the updated display name.

But as long as they could be deceived for the rest of the day, it was just a matter of deleting the account after the fact. Everything would disappear.

There were two reasons for the existence of this fake account.

The first reason was so it could persuade Isshiki Iroha to get motivated.

And the other was to act as a deterrent to Yukinoshita. While it stalled for time trying to get as many endorsements as possible, as long as it could function as data to show that it was possible for Isshiki Iroha to be elected, then that was good. If Yukinoshita was stopped, then Yuigahama would lose her motivation to run as well.

"I see… So it's passed 400 huh…"

Yukinoshita let out a sigh with a murmur as she looked at the list.

The entire school population was 1,200 people. In other words, given the case that there were three candidates, with simple calculation, to be elected would require over 400 votes.

This would serve as the basis for the possibility that Isshiki Iroha would be elected.

This should be enough for an explanation. I gathered up the printouts, stacked them on top of each other and returned them to my bag.

"In order for Isshiki to become the student council president, all of the shackles that made up the conditions have been cleared. That's why…"

And then, I looked at the two and slowly spoke.

"There isn't a need for you two to become the student council president."

It took a considerable amount of time to just say these simple words. But this was my conclusion. No one would be hurt, no one would be blamed with crimes, and no one would be judged. All those criticisms and pains would disappear along with the data of this account.

Yuigahama suddenly sighed.

"That's great… So everything's resolved now…"

She relaxed her shoulders as if she was released from fatigue and finally smiled.

I moved my neck as if the tension in my shoulders were dissolving as well.

At that moment, my eyes caught something.

Just one person.

Yukinoshita Yukino was silent.

She was silent, not making even the slightest sound, as if she was the epitome of a finely, crafted bisque doll. Her eyes had the transparency of glass and jewels, making them all the more so cold.

That shouldn't have been any different from how Yukinoshita usually is. How she was always calm, always quiet, always composed, and always graceful; her appearance, even against conventional wisdom, was breathtaking.

However, now, there was a fleeting quality in her appearance that would vanish upon coming in contact with her.

"…I see." She let out a sigh as she uttered those words and Yukinoshita raised her head. However, her gaze wasn't directed at either me or Yuigahama. "So that means… the problem and my reason to run no longer exists…"

Yukinoshita looked far into the distance outside the window.

"I guess that's how it is…"

I looked in the same direction as she did, but what I saw was the same, unchanging scenery. The waning sun and the transparent sky. Only the lonely dropping of leaves from the shaking trees were there.

"Yes…"

With a short answer, Yukinoshita silently looked away, closing her eyes as if falling into a slumber.

"I was sure it was something you could understand…"

Her voice wasn't aimed at any one. That's why, her voice sounded empty.

Those words caused turbulence in my heart.

However, it's just, as if yearning for something long ago and as if there was grievance over something that had ended, those words of hers wouldn't allow me to ask about it.

Yukinoshita quietly stood up.

"…I'll let Hiratsuka-sensei and Meguri-senpai know about the request."

"Ah, we should, too."

When Yuigahama nosily stood up from her chair, Yukinoshita gently smiled and stopped her.

"I'll be fine by myself… You can go on home without me if I end up taking too long. I'll hand back the key."

After she said that, she left the room.

That attitude and that smile directed at Yuigahama shouldn't have changed.

Yet why was I trying to see past it to see if there was anything different?

Again, my heart continued on nosily. The words that Yukinoshita spoke wouldn't leave my ears.

At that moment, for the first time, it hit me.

What if?

What if what she wanted to do was something else?

A thought like that crossed my mind despite how far too late it was.

Yukinoshita understood the minute details of the election protocols. I thought that was just a display of the abundance of her knowledge and her wisdom.

Yukinoshita said she wouldn't mind if she did it. I thought this was the same display as during the Culture Festival in how she would resist her older sister and how her personality would have her concentrate on a single task.

But what if?

What if her real intentions were there instead?

What if I had averted my eyes from the true intent buried within all those words?

What if I conveniently rationalized her behavior and acted based on my own wishful observations?

There were people who wouldn't act unless there was a problem they could identify, a reason they could find.

If something was certain as well as uncertain, there were people who wouldn't be able to act just because of the existence of the latter.

I knew that all too well. That's why it wouldn't be strange if there were other people like that as well.

Despite all that, I eliminated that possibility.

Truthfully, I didn't understand it.

It's not that I didn't exchange any words. It's just that I didn't understand what I was exchanging.

It's just that.

Deep inside, there was a lingering doubt that I may have been mistaken.

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The evening glow of the setting sun shone into the room.

We waited for Yukinoshita's return, but just like she said moments ago, the explanation seemed to be dragging on. But I didn't know if that really was the truth or not.

Right now, the only ones in the room were me and Yuigahama.

Despite having a book open, I wasn't reading it while Yuigahama was staring at her cellphone with her fingers not moving an inch.

I casually took a glimpse of the clock on the wall. The time to head home was nearing.

When I returned my eyes from the clock, they clashed with Yuigahama's. Apparently we were both looking at the clock at the same time. Yuigahama suddenly spoke up.

"Yukinon's kinda late, isn't she…?"

"…Yeah."

I replied briefly and dropped my eyes to the book in my hands once again.

But realizing doing that was pointless, I closed the book.

I worried slightly about what I should say. I scratched my head noisily and started up a conversation.

"…Uh, sorry about before."

"…Huh? Wh-Why are you apologizing?"

Yuigahama looked startled as she stiffened up.

"Well, how should I say it? You went through a lot, right? Like, uh, for your platform and speech."

"Ohh, that's what you're talking about…"

Looking convinced, Yuigahama loosened her guard.

"It's okay, you don't have to worry about it anymore."

She then showed a relieved smile.

Thanks to that, my heart felt somewhat lighter. Putting aside her personality and popularity, even though she was absolutely not suited for the practical side of things, I thought she really did try her hardest. That's why letting that go to waste was slightly agonizing. I let out a small sigh.

"You went through a lot too right, Hikki? I mean, just look at how grown out and messy your hair is."

Yuigahama pointed at my head as she said that and quickly stood up.

"Lemme fix it for you."

"Don't need it, jeez."

Although I refused her, she would say "okay okay" while ignoring me and walked around to behind me.

Her warm hands gently sifted through my hair. Even if I tried to shake my head away to avoid her, she was firmly keeping me in place.

"You really did your best, didn't you, Hikki?"

“Not really…”

As we had that conversation, her hands that were touching my hair stopped and a feeling of oppression tenderly wrapped around the back of my head as if it was being hugged. This surprised me causing my body to stiffen up.

If I were to move now, I'd needlessly increase the amount of contact between us. That would be extremely bad for me. As I sat there unable to move a single inch, a soft voice reached my ears.

"You protected my important place for me."

Those words were extremely gentle that I ended up closing my eyes. The slight and faint warmth that was transmitted to me caused me to strain my ears.

After Yuigahama let out a small sigh, she slowly continued her words.

"You see… I knew what was going to happen. I probably wouldn't have won against Yukinon and even if I did, I wouldn't be able to show up to club anymore."

She spoke awkwardly without the slightest hint of nonsense. That's why I silently listened.

"That's why," Yuigahama continued.

"It's all thanks to you, Hikki."

However, no matter how kind those words were, I couldn't accept them.

"…That's not right."

I didn't try to do anything. I didn't even know what could be done. But there were people who noticed that for me. That's why the ones deserving those kind words were them.

"You've done enough with my hair already, right?"

I pushed away Yuigahama's hands as gently as possible. Yuigahama stood behind me for a little bit longer, but after a slight smile, she pulled a chair over and sat next to me.

I couldn't face her directly so I looked in another direction disinterested.

Suddenly, Yuigahama spoke up.

"Hikki did his best!"

"What's with you so suddenly?"

She was sitting right next to me, yet her voice was loud. I reflexively turned to face Yuigahama and after she nodded, she exclaimed again in a loud voice.

"Hikki did his best!"

"Stop it. I really didn't do anything."

Really, the only things I did were type away on Twitter and talk with Isshiki. I didn't do anything meaningful of the sort. In fact, I could only think of what I did as hindering the productivity of others.

That feeling of reflection may have been heard somewhat in my voice. Yuigahama weakly nodded and smiled faintly.

"…I guess so. You didn't do anything. At least, anything that anyone could see."

I nodded only my head. However, Yuigahama shook her head in response to that.

"But if you could see it, then I think there'd be a lot of unlikeable things that were done. I'm sure even if you wanted to change it, Hikki's methods are things you can't change."

It was as if she understood the things that I did. Or could it be that she knew the truth behind those accounts? Whatever the case was, it wasn't a praiseworthy method. In fact, it was just that much worse given how it wasn't exposed.

But if no one could see it or knew about it, then there was no problem.

"If you couldn't see what it is that I did, you wouldn't know what it is."

That's why let's put this incident to rest. It was better to dig its grave now.

That was what I wanted to say.

However, Yuigahama didn't avert her eyes as she continued her words.

"But Hikki, wouldn't you keep thinking about it even if I couldn't see it and criticize it?

"No, that's–"

"…You won't stop feeling guilty."

Yuigahama interrupted me halfway through and spoke.

Yeah, that was true. It really wouldn't disappear.

Undoubtedly, there was always something I had mistaken and I would continue to live on with that feeling of anxiety.

That's why regardless of what I did, the feelings of guilt would find its way back.

"I… couldn't do anything, but… Even so, I start to think if this really was good enough. That's why I think Hikki would think about it even more."

Yuigahama gently said. She looked slightly sad as she smiled. But even so, she would be considerate of me.

That's why that kindness was extremely painful. Even though I thought I didn't want there to be any pain. Even something as simple as that wouldn't come to pass.

"…We weren't wrong about this, right?"

That question she asked was something I couldn't answer. Even though I already knew how to.

As I sat there saying nothing, Yuigahama continued with a heartfelt voice.

“Now we’ll be able to go back to like how we used to be, right?”

“…I don’t know.”

I answered honestly.

Those words Yukinoshita said at that time still wouldn’t disappear.

The illusion of being understood was pleasantly lukewarm. Indulging it would only turn it into an inescapable quagmire. Imagine how comfortable it would be if you could cling onto it for as long as you wanted.

To understand each other was an extremely cruel illusion.

Just how much despair you would have to experience upon waking up from that illusion, I didn’t know.

The slightest of discomfort and doubt would act as thorns and form into unpleasant feelings that would bring everything to ruin.

I was supposed to notice something like that.

What I desired wasn’t to get along with someone just for show.

It was surely the desire for something genuine. Anything else, I didn’t need at all.

Even if you didn’t voice your words, they would still reach; even if you didn’t do anything, you would still be understood; even if anything happened, nothing would break.

It was an illusion so beautiful, yet so foolish and detached from reality.

She and I both longed for something that genuine.

Chapter 9

The **scent of tea** no longer fills that room.

After entering the month of December, the vibes of the New Year encroached into everyday life. Even the passing of time felt like it was urging by.

What remained of this year was close to three weeks.

The end of the year mood began to fill the air with the start of December. Unlike every other year, this year's Sobu High student council officer election occurred far later than planned with little to no excitement. Yesterday, the voting took place quietly.

Isshiki begged Hayama in tears to do a campaign speech for her so they completely imitated Yukinoshita's platform in their speech. And the result of tallying the votes on the same day was Isshiki Iroha being designated as the student council president.

Starting from today was when the new student council would operate.

But that was all irrelevant to the average student as they spend the day as they usually did.

I was the same. I went on with the same life that hadn't changed to this day.

As usual, I attended classes and before realizing, it was after school.

When homeroom ended, I left the classroom.

The season had well past transitioned to winter and the visible sky from the windows of the hallway looked very cold.

I descended the stairs and turned into the hallway. Ahead was the student council room and with today being its first day of operation, there were people busily shuffling in and out the room.

Within that group of people was Isshiki Iroha.

When she saw me walking down the hallway, Isshiki gasped with a smile on her face. She waved her hands slightly in front of her chest.

I softly returned a greeting with just my neck and hurried forward.

"Senpaaai!"

When I did, Isshiki called out with a mushy voice.

This had to be that. That pattern where I would turn around because I thought I was the one being called, but when in reality, it was another senpai instead.

As I thought that, I disregarded her voice and when I began to walk again, the sound of tapping footsteps came from behind. When I turned around, Isshiki was coming after me. She pouted with a sullen look.

“Why are you ignoring mee?”

“Well, I thought you were calling someone else… Already on the job starting today?”

When I asked her, Isshiki puffed her chest out proudly.

“That’s right… Well, at first, I thought it wasn’t going to go well at all though.”

At first, she really did show a face of confidence, but as she neared the end of her sentence, that liveliness of hers grew weaker. Well, she did get swept into being the student council president with the development of events. Being anxious was reasonable and she’d probably amass quite a few failures.

But the failures she would go through from here on were definitely things you could do over, things that could be recovered. That’s why she didn’t need to fret. Feeling a little envious of that, I reflexively smiled.

“Well, there isn’t a student who is expecting anything of the student council, so why not just take it easy?”

“What’s that supposed to mean…?”

She looked at me with super spoiled eyes. But it’s not like I was expecting anything of her either… It’s just, well, if I were to pass some appropriate, encouraging words for her brand new start, then…

“…Next year, my sister’s going to enroll here.”

“Huh? Wait, the entrance exams aren’t even over yet.”

When I spoke, Isshiki shook her hands and gave me a look, “what in the world is this person saying?” “Shaddup, I’ve already decided that Komachi passing was a done deal.”

“So make it a good school.”

“…”

Isshiki’s mouth hung open. After that, not blushing and not acting flirtatious in the least, with her fluffy voice, she threw both her hands forward as if forcing back my words.

“What are you doing? Are you making passes at me? I’m sorry, you’re aiming too high. It’s creepy too and not possible.”

…The reason she rejected me this time was different than last time, wasn’t it?

“You know you’re a lot better when you talk honestly… I’m pretty sure Hayama would like you more that way.”

“Eh, really? Where’d you get that info from?”

Isshiki’s eyes suddenly sparkled as she took the bait. It’s nothing like that. I was simply just saying that compared to that character she made up for herself, it was a lot better. But explaining that was a pain, so I decided that I would deal with her indifferently and leave the premises.

“I just get that feeling. Well, do your best with whatever.”

“Okay~. Then again, that’s not it! Right now, we’re in the middle of remodeling the student council room. Do you want to see, senpai?”

Remodeling huh… Was remodeling the student council room really a thing…?

Isshiki grabbed my sleeve and pulled it. This was probably that. She was probably thinking of getting me to help her, huh…

Well, it’s not like I had any pressing matters to attend to. Since I was the one who spurred her on as the student council president, I could at least help her a little.

As I thought that, we walked towards the student council room and when we made it, a voice came from inside.

“Irohasu, what do I do with this…? Irohasu?”

This was one familiar voice… When I took a peek inside, oddly enough, Tobe was inside.

In this absurdly freezing cold, for some reason he was in a T-shirt with a towel wrapped around his head. This guy was kind of like those part timers you’d see at a ramen shop… Tobe was holding a small box with both hands and continued to call out for Isshiki. As I thought about what the heck he was holding, on closer inspection, it was a refrigerator…

“Isshiki, is that a good idea?”

I faced back to Isshiki to ask her and Isshiki energetically answered.

“Well, it’s going to be my room starting from today after all. Of course I’d want to be a little picky about these things—!”

“Ah, I see…”

What I wanted to ask wasn’t about whether bringing a refrigerator in here was a good idea, but about leaving Tobe stranded like that… He’s been calling for you since a while ago now…

“Irohasu? Where should I put the heater—?”

Tobe’s yelling voice could be heard again. When I peeked inside again, this time he was holding a halogen heater.

“Isshiki, is that a good idea?”

I asked Isshiki again and Isshiki squeezed her hands together to warm it up.

“I’m really sensitive to the cold, you know—?”

“Ah, I see…”

Like I’d know that… What I wanted to ask about was Tobe… Well, whatever, it’s Tobe after all.

But still, was this student council going to be okay…? Little late than never, but I started to get a little worried.

“Irohasu?”

Tobe stuck his head out unable to withstand it any longer.

“Oooh, what’s this? Hikitani-kun, ya helping out?”

“No… Just passing by.”

“Are ya serious? Seriously, if Hayato-kun doesn’t get here quick, I’m gonna go nuts.”

As we held that barebones conversation, Isshiki barged in.

“Ah, Tobe-senpai. The refrigerator doesn’t go there. It should go farther in. Also, the heater should be next to the table.”

“R-Right… That’s what I wanted to ask in the first place…”

Tobe’s face cramped up. Isshiki smiled as she said “please go ahead” and Tobe dragged himself back to work.

Seeing him off, Isshiki turned around to me and spoke as if the thought just came to mind at that instant.

“Ah, senpai should help out too!”

“That’s…”

Or so I said, but the student council room wasn’t all that big of a room. If there were too many people in there, I’d just be a nuisance. Besides, if you needed help, Tobe should be sufficient. There were other new looking officers running about too, so it should be okay even if I go home, right?

But in that group was a familiar person.

Meguri-senpai was laboriously carrying a heavy looking cardboard box. As soon as she noticed me, she made an airy smile. When she tried to wave her hands, realizing that her hands were occupied, she panicked horribly.

…Well, I didn’t have any urgent business anyway.

“…Just for a bit.”

“Really!? Thank you very much!”

A good portion of Isshiki’s words went through one ear and out the other as I entered the student council room. And then, I supported the baggage that Meguri-senpai was holding as she was about to lose her balance before my eyes.

“I’ll carry this for you.”

“Eh? T-T-Thank you.”

I took the cardboard box and carried it towards the entrance as per Meguri-senpai’s instructions. When I made it out into the hallway, I placed the box down softly and breathed out.

“Ahaha, I’m sorry, Hikigaya-kun.”

“It’s okay. I’m helping out after all.”

While those words were to the point and cool, the box was pretty darn heavy…

A gradual feeling of fatigue lingered on my hands. Reflexively, I looked at my palms and Meguri had a slightly embarrassed smile.

“Well, I had a lot more personal stuff than I thought. After putting them together, it turned out to be quite a lot.”

“This is personal stuff, huh…?”

I was a little interested in the personal stuff of Meguri-senpai. When you hear “a girl’s personal stuff” (English: girls’ private items), didn’t your chest throb? Didn’t it? Well, I was the only one with a throbbing chest and of course, Meguri-senpai’s chest wasn’t throbbing either. In fact, she looked a little solemn instead.

“This room seems different, huh…”

She said those few words.

Meguri-senpai’s term of office was one year. In that year, she spent her time in this room. And today, she would be yielding that to Isshiki. Of course, she wouldn’t be passing on the baton until a little later, but even so, that space where she used to be had already became something different. The people inside who were making narrow movements were different as well.

Meguri-senpai looked at them from afar and smiled.

“…To be honest, I had expectations.”

I didn’t ask what those were. Meguri-senpai continued her words slowly and carefully, with a loose tempo like always.

“Yukinoshita-san would become the president. And then, to add to that, Yuigahama-san would be the vice president. Then… Hikigaya-kun would be the general affairs!”

“Why am I the general affairs…?”

Only I get a position of no responsibility?

When I said that, Meguri-senpai amusingly laughed and continued.

“And then, see, after graduating, I would come by the student council room sometimes to have fun… And then we could talk about how fun the Culture Festival and the Athletics Festival was.”

With an innocent smile that surpassed my own youth, my senpai spoke.

“…I really wanted to do that.”

Was that kind of future even possible?

It definitely was.

However, that was an impossible dream, a proposition that would go unfulfilled.

Things could not be undone. You were only allowed to do things over. But sometimes, you weren’t allowed to do even that.

Meguri-senpai touched the door of the student council room with affection.

After that, she nodded with spirit and raised her head.

“I better teach Isshiki-san real good. Yeah, I’ll do my best!”

“…Well, I’ll be off then.”

“Okay…”

When I went up to the door, I turned around. I then bowed my head.

“Thank you for the hard work.”

“…Thank you. Hikigaya-kun too. Thank you for your hard work!”

That gentle voice was received by my back as I left the student council room.

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After leaving the student council room, I walked down the hallway leading to the special building.

On that day. On that day with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama when I confirmed their intentions for running for candidacy. A whole week had passed since then. On that day, we waited for Yukinoshita to come back, but because she came back at the very last minute before it was time to head home, we went our ways without having a decent conversation.

But the club continued as usual. There weren’t any changes in the activity details and the club. Either I was reading a book like always or I was just idling leisurely.

I placed my hands on the door when I arrived in front of the room. I nonchalantly opened the door.

“Yo.”

I gave a short greeting and Yuigahama, whose face was buried in the desk, perked up.

“Hikki, you’re so slow!”

“Er, something came up. Sorry.”

I pulled my chair out as I said that. A quiet voice called out to me from a position slightly farther from the usual place.

“It’s not a problem. It’s not like we’re particularly busy with anything right now.”

Yukinoshita spoke, not looking any different up until now. The tone of her voice was extremely composed. Her gaze was directed at the book in her hands and the tip of her fingers slowly turned the pages of the book.

Yuigahama complained momentarily, but since there wasn’t anything to do, she went back to fiddling with her cellphone.

“Well, I guess we have some free time right now.”

“Sounds good to me, having free time and all. They do say stuff like there being no leisure for the poor, so having free time is a good thing. Well, since that’s the case, it’s exactly because of society’s unemployment that, conversely, you would end up being the wealthy winner. As I thought, to work is to lose.”

“That’s an opinion very like you.”

Yukinoshita spoke calmly as she flipped the page of her book. I also grabbed a book out of my bag and opened up to a page I wouldn’t even read.

“School’s about to end soon, huh?”

With no logical context, Yuigahama spoke and hit her hands as if she came up with something.

“Ah, let’s have a Christmas party, a party! I want to eat pizza.”

“Yuigahama-san, you can eat that whenever you want.”

As usual, Yukinoshita continued reading as she said that and Yuigahama had a perplexed expression.

“Eh. Really? My house only eats it on special days so…”

“Well, my place only orders it on special days too. Like during a typhoon or on a day with heavy snow.”

“The special ones are your family, Hikki… Poor delivery men…”

Regardless of what she said, it was their job as delivery men so it couldn’t be helped. If they’re going to hate someone, then they should hate the very existence of jobs. Anyway, I had an argument for that prepared.

“They’re a lot more pitiful on Christmas, aren’t they? What with all the orders they get. As such, the days where they didn’t get very many orders were a form of consideration.”

“I guess…”

Yuigahama had an unconvinced expression, but halfway through, something came to mind.

“Ah! Right! That’s why a party! See, maybe at like Yukinon’s place or something.”

“That sounds lovely… But, I’m sorry. I’ll be going back home this winter.”

When Yukinoshita spoke, Yuigahama came up with a new proposal.

“Ah, I see. Why don’t we go out somewhere, then?”

“Sure. However, I still don’t know what the plans at home are yet.”

Saying that, Yukinoshita faced Yuigahama and smiled.

“…Oh okay. Then after you find out, okay?”

What did Yuigahama think about after seeing that smile?

The setting sun had already disappeared into the end of the sea. Only the afterglow lingered in the sky and the radiance was nowhere to be found. There was just this loneliness that seemingly regretted the end of the day.

“The day’s gotten shorter, huh…”

Yukinoshita murmured, apparently looking outside the window just like me.

It was almost time for the winter solstice to come. Recently, the dark nights gradually and steadily grew longer. These long, dark nights would probably become longer as if dawn would never come.

“Why don’t we stop here for today?”

Having said that, Yukinoshita closed her book and placed it in her bag. We nodded and stood up.

This entire week was spent the same way similar to today.

Yukinoshita looked the same as she did before the field trip.

No, she was conducting herself in the same and unchanging way. I thought that was something obvious to anyone.

She was very quiet, but she would properly react and she would occasionally softly smile at Yuigahama.

However, that horrible way of smiling wasn’t it. As if thinking of the deceased, as if looking at an infant, as if yearning for something that couldn’t be recovered anymore, that way of smiling tormented the hearts of those it was directed at.

However, she couldn’t be criticized.

That’s because both Yuigahama and I were going along with it. We would fire conversations one after the other and force ourselves to say stupid things to stave away silence.

It was a meaningless period of time, a skidding emptiness of superficiality. It was an act that appeared friendly only on the surface which was what both she and I should have hated the most.

This, which I gambled for close to a month and grabbed ahold of, was what I believed in.

What I asked myself repeatedly over and over again, I did it once more; “did I not make a mistake?”

Was I just drunk on myself? Was I indulging in my own confidence? Was I happy with my own thoughts? Were the things I was supposed to have done somewhere else and not plan more than I needed to?

Even so, the reason why I couldn’t provide an answer undoubtedly was a fault with my myself.

I was called a monster of logic.

But logic was the opposite of emotions.

Therefore, a monster of logic was an existence inferior to people that didn’t understand emotions. Wasn’t I told that? That it was an existence less than that of a person and that it would look at people not as a human and that it would continue to be a slave to its conscious of its own free will.

The moment just before I left the room, I turned around.

Even though the same people were gathered here, it felt like it was a completely different place.

The scent of tea was no longer there.

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“What if?”

This is a “what if?” scenario.

What if life was like a game where you could load up a save file and go back to a point where you could alter your choice? Would your life change in any way?

The answer is a resounding no.

Only those who were blessed with choices would benefit. To those who never had those choices in the first place, that hypothetical scenario was meaningless.

As such, there would be no regrets. More accurately, it was life itself that was the epitome of regrets.

Now then, there was something I thought I really wanted to protect, but what exactly was it?

Afterword

Hello there, I'm Work. Whoooa, that's not good! I got it wrong! Because work has been really hard lately, I mixed up the characters of Watari Wataru with work. Hello once again, I'm Watari Wataru.

Recently, I've been so swamped with work that I haven't had the chance to meet with anyone outside of work. Every now and then I'd get invitations to go out to eat and to drinking parties via mail and phone calls but I typically didn't' give very appropriate replies to them.

Well, "I'm busy" was a reason for getting away from annoying things, but since it was convenient, I end up using it more often than I thought I would. When I really do want to go, I just skip out on work after all!

In a similar way, people would lie to others. Not only to others but to themselves as well. But, well, for me, it's not a lie when I'm busy, just a tad bit down-to-earth.

Still, there are times when promises made with sincerity ultimately become lies. "If it's until tomorrow, then I got this in the bag, gahaha!" was something I'd say in the same way I'd say "…could we make it next week somehow?" in a calm way. Even if it wasn't intentional or apparent in what was said, ultimately, it would end up becoming a lie.

That's why he and she as well as anyone else… of course, that includes me, the writer, as well tell lies. No, perhaps it was something else. When you determined something as a lie, then the words may very well become lies.

That's why I can't easily say "next time for sure, I'll finish writing early, fuhaha!". To be quiet and not say anything. That's exactly why there are also things that can be communicated. It's just that whatever was communicated, it could either be a lie or the truth. Accepting that would mean abandoning yourself.

In any case, this was "Yahari ore no Seishun Rabu Kome ha Machigatteiru." Volume 8. Let us meet again in volume 9! Yeaah right, I might be lying there, just kidding! Ufufu!

My gratitude to those that follow. T-This isn't a lie, okay!

Ponkan8-sama. Thank you for your hard work with the illustrations as well as working alongside with me! You're the best! The feeling that tells me "this is a heroine" was wonderful this time as well! Thank you very much!

Editor-in-Charge Hoshino-sama. This time's progress to hell was a really big burden to you. It's that, like really, I was late because of that… I'm not at fault, it's society's fault. Thank you very much!

To those who contributed with the compilation of images. I'm extremely happy that you all drew the many different aspects of the world of Oregairu and its characters. They were all very wonderful that both my eyes and my heart are very happy. My eyes that were done in by the blue light are all healed up. Thank you very much.

And lastly, to all the readers. I apologize for making you wait since volume 7. This irregular youth love comedy will continue for just a little longer. I'll be very happy if you could accompany me to the very end.

Now then, I've used up what remaining space I was allotted so I'll stop here.

On a certain day in October in the long lasting cold nights as I drink a waaaarm MAX coffee.

Wataru Watari

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